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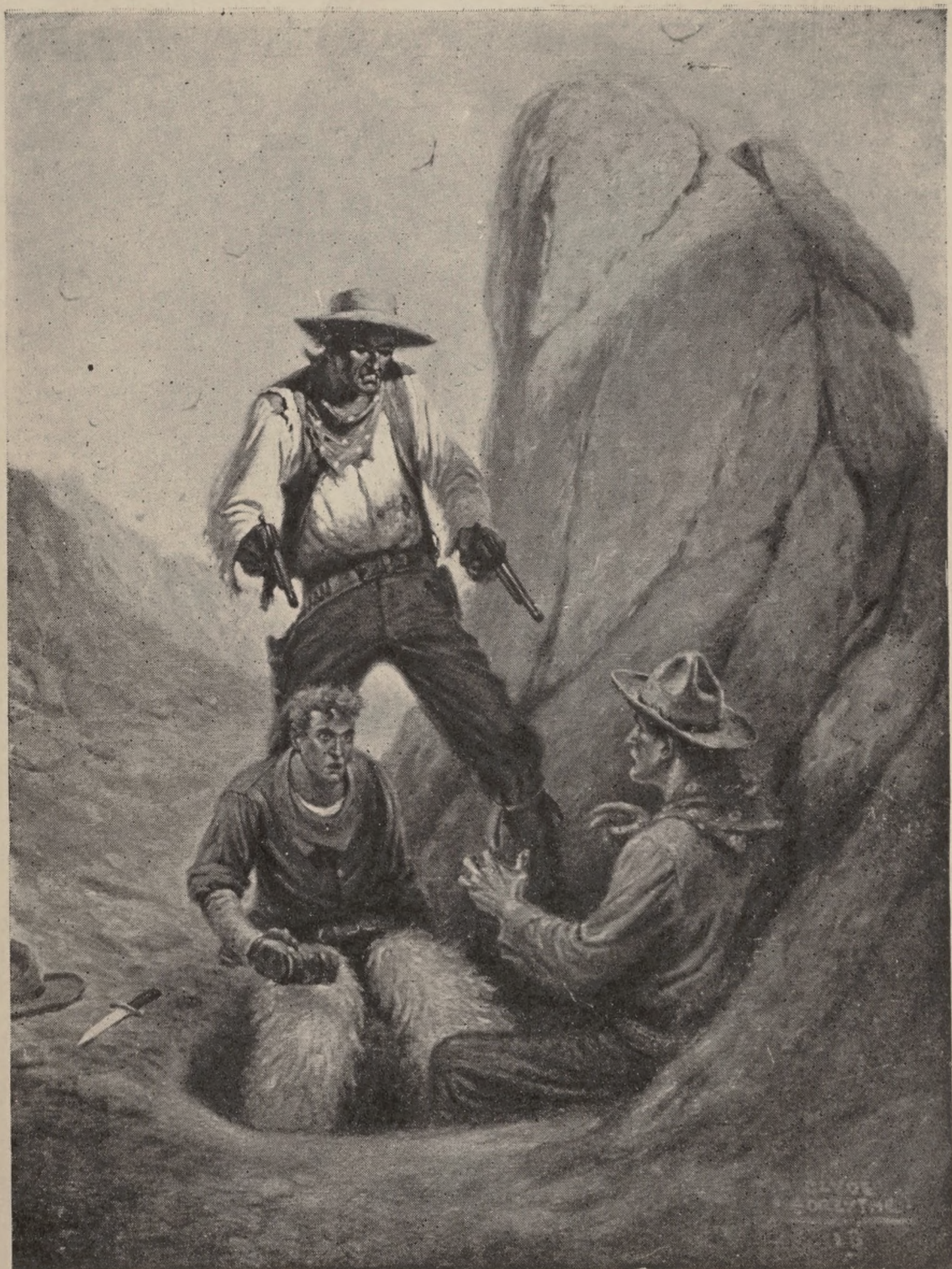
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**CURLY
OF THE CIRCLE BAR**



“Will yuh gentlemen kindly elevate your hands?”

CURLY OF THE CIRCLE BAR

BY

JOSEPH B. AMES

Author of "THE MYSTERY OF RAM ISLAND,"

"UNDER BOY SCOUT COLORS," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY
CLYDE FORSYTHE



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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	ONCE TOO OFTEN	3
II	FLIGHT	12
III	AN OLD FRIEND	21
IV	THE CIRCLE BAR	29
V	THE DANCE THAT NEVER WAS	38
VI	PEDRO	45
VII	THE WAY OF A GREASER	58
VIII	THIRTEEN RATTLES AND A BUTTON	68
IX	THE SHOT IN THE DUSK	77
X	WOUNDED	90
XI	MYSTERY	98
XII	MR. KERNS ARRIVES	107
XIII	THE BAITING OF CLARENCE	118
XIV	BLACK DEVIL, OUTLAW	126
XV	THE FACE IN THE MOONLIGHT	134
XVI	THE MYSTERY DEEPENS	145
XVII	HEADING SOUTH	153
XVIII	THE TIN BOX	160
XIX	THE CUP AND THE LIP	169

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
XX	TRAPPED	176
XXI	THE HAND OF A CHILD	183
XXII	AN OLD SCORE	192
XXIII	PAUL GRAHAM'S SECRET	203
XXIV	THE SEARCH FOR A NAME	213
XXV	JOHN POPHAM, ATTORNEY	223
XXVI	AFTER FIFTEEN YEARS	231
XXVII	THE DESERTED FLAT	239
XXVIII	THE END OF THE SEARCH	248
XXIX	EVER AFTERWARD	257

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

“Will yuh gentlemen kindly elevate your hands?”	<i>Frontispiece</i>
	FACING PAGE
As the echoes of the last shot died away, he held his breath, waiting for a reply	8
When he reached the flats, he paused to reconnoitre	16
A sudden burning pain like the searing of a red hot iron bit through his shoulder	88
With a scream of rage, the horse dropped his head and began to pitch	132
Loaded quirt in hand, Curly leaped at him	200
The lawyer pounced eagerly on the letters	228
Dorothy found his eyes fixed on her with a look of wistful tenderness	260

**CURLY
OF THE CIRCLE BAR**

CURLY OF THE CIRCLE BAR

CHAPTER I

ONCE TOO OFTEN

AFTER a momentary lull, the crack of shots sounded through the hot, still air with sharp distinctness. The ping of flying bullets was like the vibrations of a taut steel wire. Two of them thudded into the door post; the third plowed through the flimsy door, shattered the lamp on the table, and buried itself in the hard earthen wall beyond.

It was, after all, rather a waste of good ammunition. Some other bullet had done the work quite thoroughly, and the cause of that mad outbreak of lawlessness lay motionless, face downward, under the table. One arm was doubled under him, the other outstretched with rigid fingers still gripping an empty six-shooter. There was no mistaking the pose of that long length of brown chaps, blue flannel shirt and dark, rumpled hair. He had fought his last fight. Whether it was a case of just

retribution or a tragical blunder of well-meant zeal, it was all the same to him now, for nothing mattered.

But in a little thicket of mesquite, not a stone's throw from the cabin door, there crouched one who was very much alive indeed, and to whom every move in the game was of vital, vivid interest. As he huddled close to the ground, the stunted bushes barely reached above the matted tangle of his tawny hair. One side of his grime-streaked face showed an ugly bruise. The collar of his shirt was gone, and the right sleeve torn bodily away at the shoulder. There was a strained look in his eyes, and as the echoes of the last shot died away he held his breath, waiting anxiously for the reply. When moment after moment passed in silence he stirred uneasily.

"I guess they 've got him," he muttered, peering through the leaves. He could see nothing of the cow-punchers, who were on the other side of the cabin, and as he shifted his position restlessly there was a puzzled expression in his gray eyes. "I 'm not as glad as I ought to be," he murmured. "I wonder why?"

For the past hour events had moved so swiftly that there had been little time to think. But now, at the first lull, his mind flew back to the moment of his awakening that morning. There had been no

preliminary yawning or stretching. He had opened his eyes abruptly and found himself looking straight into the face of Jerry Harden, who stood a few feet away from the bunk.

This in itself was not unusual. He had always known Jerry. For as many of his sixteen years as he could remember they had lived together and the boy had learned to take the other's frequent abuse and roughness with the hardened calm of one who accepts the chaff with the wheat. He had known the man in various states of intoxication and was used to the effect of an unbridled temper on the fellow at all times. But this morning there was a glare in the cold eyes, an ominous twitching of the hard mouth, which sent an unwonted shiver of fear tingling on the boy's spine.

"Well, going to lie abed all day?" snarled Harden suddenly.

The words snapped from his twitching lips in much the same way that the empty shells shot out of the cylinder of his Colt. The boy sprang to his feet.

"N-o," he stammered. "I—I just waked up."

"Huh!" The man jammed a greasy rag on a bit of wire into the gun-barrel. "Where 's the cartridges? Not them, you fool!" His voice rose in a sudden shriek of senseless fury. "Where 's your eyes? *Forty-fives!*"

With trembling fingers the boy snatched the right box from a shelf and handed it to Jerry, only to receive a blow across his face which knocked him headlong. As he scrambled to his feet, one hand involuntarily against his cheek, Harden stared at him with narrowing eyes. His fingers were busy slipping cartridges into the gun.

“That ’s nothin’ to what you ’ll get the next time,” he said ominously. “You pull the saddle off’n that horse out there and get it onto Badger. If you ’re more ’n three minutes about it they ’ll be your last three. Savvy?”

The boy was out of the door like a flash and at the side of the horse that stood there with sides heaving. He had n’t the least doubt that Jerry would keep his word, and so great was his haste that he had the cinch unbuckled and the bridle reins in his hand before he realized that, not only had he never seen either horse or saddle before, but that his hand, which had rested on the saddle-skirt, was smeared with red. For an instant he stood looking stupidly at it, his heart going like a trip-hammer. Then he hastily yanked the saddle off, dropped it to the ground, snatched the bridle, and flew toward the lean-to back of the cabin for his rope.

He had scarcely dived into it when he whirled

around and stood listening. Faintly at first, but growing rapidly clearer, came the dull beat of horses galloping over the sandy bottom of the canyon. With a quick-drawn breath the boy darted behind the door and peered through the crack. Louder came the sound, and louder still. Then suddenly he saw them, a dozen or fifteen cow-punchers riding at top speed in a long, wavering line, the ends of which converged as they neared the cabin.

The boy's first instinctive impulse was to shout a warning to Jerry. Then he realized that it was too late. The man was caught like a rat in a trap; he himself had a bare chance to escape if he took it quickly. He knew well enough what to expect if the cow-punchers came upon him all blood-stained as he was, and with swift, silent steps he reached a small window at the back of the shed and drew himself up to it. As he did so a single shot rang out followed by a rattling fusillade. Frantically he squeezed into the window and tried to wriggle through, head first, then his left arm and shoulder. The sleeve of his shirt caught on a nail and tore with a ripping sound. Now his other shoulder was free and at length, with a squirming effort, he pulled his hips loose and tumbled in a heap back of the corral.

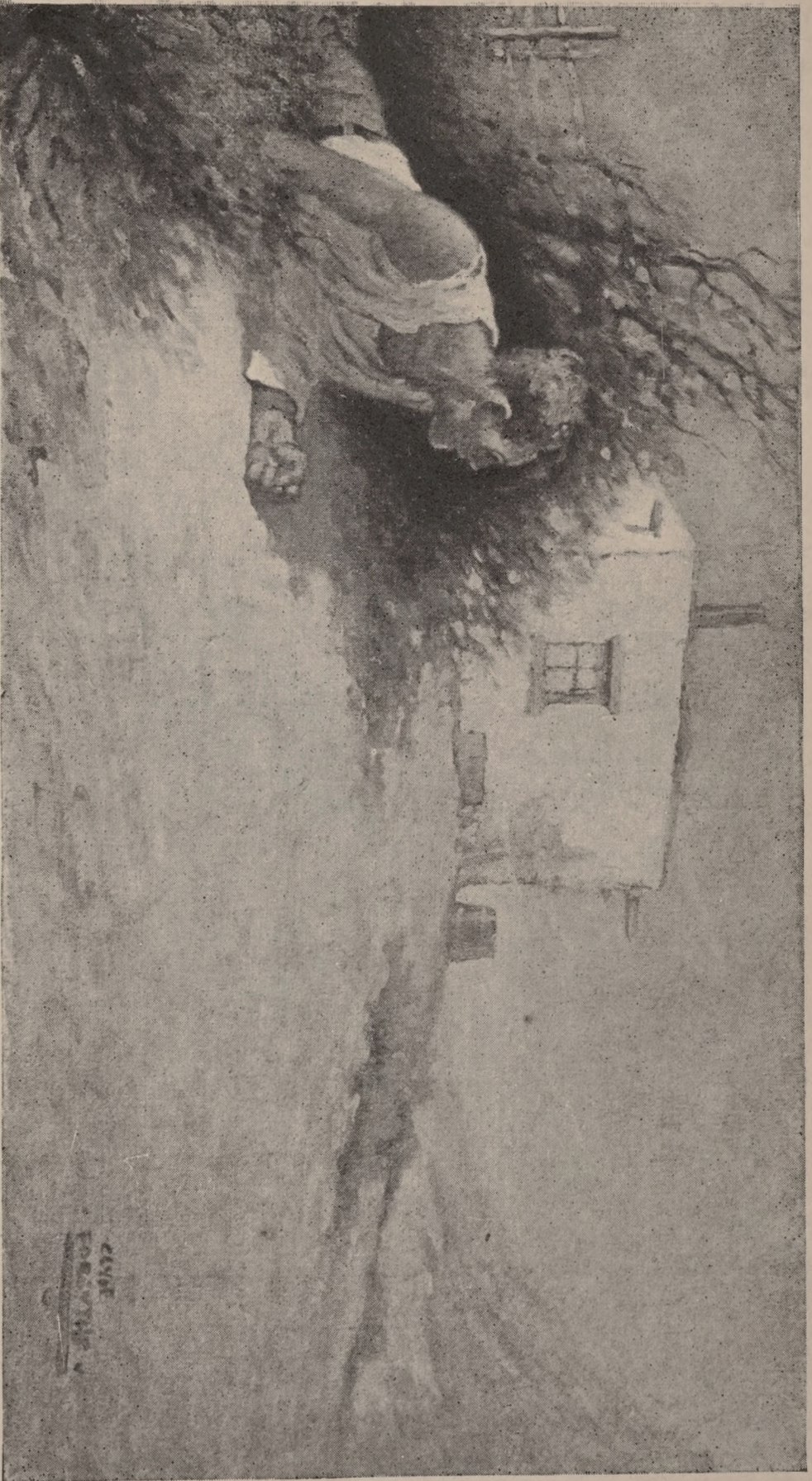
For a moment or two he lay there breathing hard. Then he arose cautiously and feeling inside the window secured the telltale sleeve. Stuffing that inside his shirt, he dropped to the ground and began crawling toward a clump of bushes which grew close to the steep side of the canyon. He reached them safely and for a long time he lay there frantic with impatience at his inability to find out anything that was going on. He was not surprised at what had happened. The wonder was that it had not come before. Jerry had certainly taken chances enough. For a while the shots continued fiercely. Then they died down and finally ceased altogether. Presently three more rang out. There was no answer.

Ten minutes later the sound of voices told him that some of the men were entering the corral. Apparently they were examining the horses, for they came nearer and nearer. At length the boy recognized the voice of the wagon boss of the F. M., one of the largest outfits in Midland County, and the one which had suffered most from Jerry Harden's depredations.

"Shorty must have caught him with the goods, all right. He had six of the stock out of North Pasture."

"How d' yuh know that?" inquired a strange voice. "Shorty live to give evidence?"

As the echoes of the last shot died away he held his breath, waiting for a reply



“Nothin’ like it. He didn’t last five minutes from the look of the wound. Harry seen the horses runnin’ wild down by the river.”

“How ’d yuh know it was this fellow?”

“By his horse. Shorty must have shot it as he went down, ’cause there he lay with saddle an’ bridle on, and the cuss took Shorty’s Monte. I seen him by the door as we rid up. We ’ve had our eyes on this Harden, though, for some while. Wonder where that boy of his—Jim—is? I ’d sure like to get a hold of him. They ’re two of a kind, all right.”

The boy’s eyes narrowed as he listened.

“We ’ll get him sooner or later,” commented the other man. They were moving away by this time. “What are you goin’ to do with his stock?”

“Leave it here till the sheriff comes. Tom ’s gone to Midland after him. I ’m goin’ back—”

The words died away in a murmur as the men departed and presently silence fell. Crouching on the ground, Jim was thinking rapidly. Plainly this was no place for him and the sooner he got away the better. The difficult part, of course, would be to secure a horse. He wondered how long the boys would stay there, and whether they would leave any one behind to keep watch and look after things while they were gone. Midland was thirty miles away and the sheriff could

scarcely be reached before late in the afternoon. Quite possibly he would not arrive until the next morning, so there was a fair chance of catching a horse after dark and slipping away unseen. He felt no compunctions in taking one. The stock belonged to Jerry—at least some of it did—and he surely had as much right to a horse as the sheriff.

As the hours passed he began to grow intolerably thirsty and hungry, and at length, about three o'clock, he could stand it no longer and decided to reconnoitre. Carefully crawling out of the bushes he reached the corner of the corral fence and peered around it. From where he lay he could see one side of the dugout and the sandy, level stretch leading down to the entrance of the canyon. Only the immediate front of the cabin was hidden, and it seemed very unlikely that so many men would be crowded into that small space; he was quite sure they would n't be inside. For ten minutes he lay still, listening for any sound of talking, and then had just about decided to venture from cover when he noticed in the corral, with Jerry's stock, a strange horse bearing the F. M. brand.

"I 'm a good one!" he muttered sarcastically. "A minute more and I 'd have walked into him like a cute little boy going to Sunday School." His

forehead wrinkled anxiously. "Wonder where the deuce he 's keeping himself?"

Raising himself from the ground, his eyes darted keenly over every visible nook and corner of the canyon. The steep, rocky sides were bare and open, the only vegetation being the clump of mesquite he had just left. No one in his right senses would stay five minutes on the sandy bottom of the canyon, all aglare in the hot September sun. The corral was out of the question.

"Reckon he must be in front of the cabin, just outside the door," he thought finally. "It would n't be a bad time to sneak my saddle out of the shed while he 's out of sight."

Reaching the corner of the lean-to, he rose to his feet and started around to the door. Midway he stopped suddenly, tiptoed back to the window and looked in. Like a flash he ducked, for just inside the door, his head pillowed on a rolled-up slicker, lay one of the F. M. cow-punchers fast asleep.

CHAPTER II

FLIGHT

AFTER that first moment of startled surprise, Jim breathed a sigh of relief. While this new development made it difficult or impossible to get his saddle, it was a great deal to have located the guard and to know that the way to the cabin was clear. Rapidly he skirted the corral fence and approached the door from the other side. On the threshold he hesitated a moment and then stepped inside. Jerry still lay where he had fallen, and as the boy stood looking down on him he felt a lump rising in his throat and his eyelids stung. During the years of close intimacy Jerry had shown him a good deal of rough kindness, and it was this that Jim thought of now.

“It’s a darn shame!” he muttered, turning away abruptly. “He didn’t have a chance.”

But there was no time to waste in vain regrets. Swiftly he set about collecting the things he needed. From the bunk he took a shirt and some small articles, and got his hat and chaps from behind the door. Jerry’s thirty-eight lay on the

shelf, and with a belt and several boxes of cartridges was quickly added to the pile. He stuffed one pocket with crackers and another with bacon, and then, after a moment's thought, he went over to a corner and, stooping down, pulled one of the sods from its place. Reaching into the small cavity back of it, he drew out a roll of bills and a handful of silver which he thrust into his shirt. This done, he gathered everything into his arms and started for the door. There he stopped, hesitated and finally came slowly back. He dropped the armful on the table, and kneeling down, softly touched the crisp, black hair.

"Good-bye, Jerry," he whispered, in a voice which broke a little.

Then, without a backward glance, he picked up his bundle and hurried out. Back in the bushes he changed his shirt and disposed the other things about him with the greatest haste, for he had determined to secure the saddle and get away at once. It was entirely too risky staying here. At any time the sheriff or some of the other men might show up, making it impossible for him to run a horse out. And without a horse he would be quite helpless.

The saddle lay on the floor of the shed to the right of the door and not six feet from the sleeping man. As Jim studied the situation through

the window, he almost despaired, for it seemed impossible to carry it away without waking the cow-puncher. However, there was nothing to be gained by delay, and the heavy breathing of the fellow was somewhat encouraging. So the boy pulled himself together and slipped noiselessly around to the door. He stood there for a moment holding his breath. Then he stepped lightly over the prostrate form. With infinite care he lifted the saddle firmly by horn and cantle, steadied himself for an instant, then turned and stepped carefully out again.

It seemed easy enough after it was done, but as he laid the saddle down by the corral gate and undid the hook, the sweat stood out in beads on his forehead and his knees shook from the nervous strain.

The rest was comparatively simple. Jim had his eye on Red Bird, a bright bay with plenty of speed and endurance, yet gentle enough to be caught without a rope. Within five minutes he was in the saddle guiding him carefully down the canyon. When he reached the flats he paused to reconnoitre, but there was no one in sight, and turning north he urged the horse to full speed.

Twenty minutes later he drew rein at the mouth of a small canyon leading to the Conchas River, and started down it at a walk. It was a lonely

spot and would do very well as a refuge until he could venture on under cover of the darkness. When he reached the water he leaped off and dropping down beside a boulder, he fell to on the crackers and bacon, which disappeared in very short order. There was a wait of half an hour or more before the sun set, but at length twilight began to fall, and, mounting again, he urged Red Bird into the river. This was broad and shallow and easy to ford, and by the time he reached the flats beyond he could see barely a hundred yards ahead of him.

He had determined to leave that part of Texas for good and all and strike out for himself where he was quite unknown. The step had been in his mind for some time, practically ever since that day several months ago when he had realized finally and definitely what he had been suspecting for an even longer period—that Jerry Harden's modest ranching operations were not what they appeared to be on the surface. He wished now that he had run away before. If only he had gone when the idea first occurred to him he would have escaped this last catastrophe with its humiliations and danger. But until to-day he had not realized the extent to which the neighboring cow-punchers evidently classed him with the man he lived with. It hurt and horrified him, and for a long time as he

flew northward over the silent, starlit prairie, the cool night wind cutting his face, he could think of nothing else. Then he began to wonder where Homer was.

Two years before, while riding across one of the F. M. pastures, he had come upon a cow-puncher of about his own age trying to pull a steer out of the bog. It was an impossible task for one man, for the animal was well in to his shoulders, so Jim promptly took down his rope and together they worked for nearly an hour before they were successful. This acquaintance ripened into a friendship which lasted until Homer threw up his job six months before and departed, leaving Jim disconsolate at the loss. One short letter came a couple of months later from a ranch up in the Panhandle. But though he answered it at once he never heard again. It was the hope of finding this friend more than anything else which headed him northward instead of toward New Mexico.

All night long the boy rode steadily, stopping only at fences to take down the wire, and by daybreak he had covered some thirty-five miles. As soon as it began to grow light, he dismounted and, tying Red Bird to a mesquite, threw himself on the ground and fell instantly asleep. When he awoke the sun was well up, so he did not delay, but ate the remainder of his crackers as he rode.



When he reached the flats, he paused to reconnoitre

He was on Cross T. ground where he had been several times before in search of strays and about ten o'clock he encountered one of the men riding fence. From him he learned the location of the outfit and after a few minutes' chat he headed in that direction, riding up to the chuck wagon just as the men were trooping in for dinner. He joined them with some slight trepidation, but evidently news of the tragedy to the southward had not yet reached this outfit. Jim explained his presence by saying that he had left Harden and was bound for the Panhandle, and after a hearty meal and an hour's rest, he mounted and rode on again.

He went without supper that night and breakfast the next morning, and when he struck one of the chuck wagons of the big X Bar Y outfit about eleven o'clock, he was too ravenous to wait for dinner and begged some bread from the cook. When the men came in a couple of hours later they showed no particular curiosity as to his presence there, and he stayed about the wagon for several hours, resting and chatting. Amongst other things he learned the disappointing fact that the L S ranch, from which Homer had written, was located in Randall County more than a hundred miles farther north.

Toward the end of the afternoon three days

later he rode up to the L S bunk-house and, slipping off his horse, opened the door. A young fellow of about twenty, sprawling on one of the beds, looked up enquiringly.

“Howdy,” said Jim casually. “Boss around?”

“Why, yes, kid; at least he was five minutes ago. You ’ll have to step lively, though, ’cause I think he ’s goin’ to town. Lookin’ for a job?”

Jim nodded.

“Pretty full up now,” the other remarked, lying back on the bed. “It won’t do no harm to try him, though. He ’s over in the ranch house.”

Jim found him in the kitchen washing his face in a tin basin. He shook his head dubiously when the boy asked him about work.

“Got about all the hands I want just now,” he said, reaching for a towel. “About the only thing I can give yuh is a job horse-wranglin’.”

Jim hesitated. “Have you got a fellow named Homer Hoskins here?” he asked.

“Hoskins? No; he quit a couple of months ago; said he was goin’ to the Matadores.”

“He was a chum of mine and I wanted to locate him if I could,” explained the boy. “Besides, I ’m not dead in love with horse wranglin’ if I can get anything else.”

“Well, suit yourself.” The man stood with his

hand on the latch. "If you change your mind let me know to-morrow."

He departed without further words and Jim, following slowly, watched him mount and disappear around the corner of the ranch house. Then he moved toward the bunk-house, discouraged and at a loss. The Matadores was a big outfit over in New Mexico. It was a long distance to travel on a chance, and Homer might never have gone there at all. Besides, he could not afford to go on looking for his friend indefinitely. He must find a job and begin to make his own way in life. That was the most important thing at present, and it began to seem as if he would have to let the other go.

"Any luck?" inquired the cow-puncher—Sam by name—as Jim entered the bunk-house.

"Nothing but horse wrangling, and I'm not stuck on that."

"No, nor nobody else." Sam arose and stretched himself lazily. "It's a rotten job, and you don't get the pay of a straight hand at that. Why don't you try the Circle Bar, over in Oldham," he suggested, poking up the fire in the small, sheet-iron stove. "One of their men stopped here this mornin' on his way to town, an' I reckon his place ain't filled yet."

Questioned, he furnished Jim with further details of the outfit in question, and before he slept

that night the boy determined to try for a job there. They were both up early for Sam was returning to the round-up, and after a hearty breakfast Jim saddled up and left the ranch. Sam had given him accurate directions as to the location of the Circle Bar ranch, but the country was rough and broken and he lost his way several times. Consequently, it was dusk when Jim rode up to the bunk-house and slid off his horse.

He was tired and cold and discouraged, and as he leaned wearily against Red Bird's neck the boy wondered whether he would have to ride on again next day. It seemed as if he had done nothing else but ride on for everlasting ages. Presently he gave the horse a pat, and, with a long sigh, stepped forward and opened the door.

CHAPTER III

AN OLD FRIEND

THE room was long and low and rather shadowy. In a rough stone fire-place at one end a fire gleamed, for the past few days had been raw and chilly, and sprawling lazily before it were three men. When the latch clicked they looked up, and for an instant, as Jim stood blinking in the firelight, no one spoke. Then suddenly one of the others leaped to his feet and made a dash at the newcomer.

“Holy smoke!” he shouted. “If it ain’t Curly!”

He smote the startled boy on the shoulder with staggering force, and snatching his hand pumped it up and down furiously. Jim stared at him dazedly for a moment.

“Homer!” he gasped at length. “Why, I thought— I didn’t know— Gee! If I’m not glad to see you!”

Grinning broadly and retaining his hold on Jim’s shoulder, Homer pushed him toward the fire. He was a slim, good-looking boy with dark, wavy hair and brown eyes that had a twinkle in

them. His skin was clear and smooth, with a bright flush showing beneath the tan. He had also long curling lashes which gave him an innocent, almost girlish appearance that was most deceptive.

“This is my side-partner, fellows,” he announced, as they joined the other two. “We used to run together a lot down in Midland. This tall, han’some Adonis, kid, is Kawikee. There ain’t a thing on earth he ’s scart of, exceptin’ his wife that he went an’ married sort of casual one night when he was a little too happy. When he come to he made a quick getaway and never stopped runnin’ till he struck Texas. The other one with the high forehead is Baldy. He ain’t so good-lookin’, but he ’s all brain.”

Both men grinned as they shook hands with Curly. Evidently they were used to Homer’s nonsense, for Baldy dropped lazily back on the floor without a word, while Kawikee contented himself with a sudden, deft grab at Homer’s ankles which brought him down with a jarring thud. Curly settled himself beside the others, scarcely able to credit his good fortune.

“Yuh shore look good to me, you old maverick,” Homer went on, giving his arm a squeeze. “I thought you ’d just about taken root in that hole down there. How ’d you come to hit the sod?”

"I had to," answered Curly promptly.

He had no intention of keeping back anything. After all, he had done nothing to be ashamed of, except, perhaps, in holding his tongue when he first learned of Jerry's thieving propensities. So he outlined the incidents of his flight as briefly as he could and when he had finished the men were looking at him with considerably more interest than they had shown before.

"Well, what do you know about that?" exclaimed Homer, his eyes wide with surprise. "Some excitement, eh? I always suspicioned that boss of yours wasn't altogether on the square. You handled that getaway pretty nice, too. I reckon I couldn't 'a done better myself." He smiled engagingly. "What are yuh goin' to do now? Brace Bert for a job?"

"Bert?"

"Bert Hanson, the boss. He ain't a bad sort, and he 'll take you on, too, 'cause he fired a couple of the Greasers last week, an' Sourface quit day before yesterday. Go ahead, kid. We could have a dandy time." His eyes sparkled at the possibilities. "We could certainly raise—"

"You sure would," Baldy interrupted. "Lord knows you 're bad enough by yourself, an' I 'd hate to think what the two of you 'd do."

"Aw, shucks, you old bluff!" Homer scoffed.

“You know right well life would n’t be worth livin’ without the little things I think of now and then to liven you up.”

“Now and then is good—distinctly good,” Kawi-kee grinned. “Why, infant, you ’re worse ’n a three-ring circus goin’ continuous. If you put over stunts any oftener—Wough! Help! Get off, yuh little devil!”

A young tornado had landed suddenly on his stomach and for five minutes there was a whirlwind of arms and legs. When this subsided Kawi-kee lay helpless from laughter with Homer astride of him, his fingers clutching the other’s ribs.

“Oh, Lord!” gasped Kawikee. “Take him away, Baldy.”

Baldy calmly lit a cigarette. “Take him away yourself,” he returned composedly. “It ain’t none of my funeral. I notice yuh didn’t do nothin’ when he had me roped yesterday.”

“You—you looked—so—funny.” The words came in gasps. “Be nice, kid, an’ get up. I ’ll be good.”

When quiet was restored, Homer turned to Curly as though there had been no interruption to the conversation.

“You ’ll stay, won’t you?” he asked.

Curly grinned. “Sure thing—if Hanson ’ll take me on.”

The general impression seemed to be that his chances were pretty good, but Bert had ridden in to town and would not be back till late, so the matter could not be settled definitely until morning. After supper Homer and Curly settled down to talk and by the time they were ready to turn in they discussed in detail everything of importance that had happened to one or the other since their last parting.

Curly awoke rather late next morning and found the bunk-house deserted by all save Homer, who still slept soundly beside him. As soon as he had hurried into his clothes, he proceeded to goad his friend into complete wakefulness and then fled to escape the resulting shower of missiles hurled at him. Dashing out of the door, he collided violently with a man who was about to enter.

"Gosh!" grunted the newcomer, reaching for his Stetson. "You ain't any lightweight, young 'un."

Curly caught his breath. "I didn't see you comin'," he explained, showing a row of nice teeth. "I reckon you 're Bert, are n't you?"

"You guessed right," the man answered. He stood erect, hands on his hips. "What can I do for you?"

Curly's eyes gleamed. "Why, if you 're lookin' for a first-class hand, you can take me on."

Bert's lips twitched as he looked the boy over appraisingly. He rather liked this youngster with the laughing gray eyes and the mass of curly yellow hair, who stood before him full of the lithe, unconscious grace and alertness of youth and strength and glowing health.

"Well, I don't know but I do need a man," he remarked reflectively. "Of course you understand we don't have nothin' but first-class hands around here." His eyes twinkled.

The teeth gleamed again briefly. "Of course! That 's why I came. I got kinda tired of the third-rate bunch down in Midland."

"Midland? What outfit?"

"Not much of a one. I worked for Jerry Harden; maybe you 've heard of—him." Curly's face grew serious. "I might just as well get it out of my system first as last," he went on. "Jerry was pinched runnin' steers off the F. M. ranch, and shot one of their hands. Then the bunch got busy and kinda made a human collander out of him; an' as they was after me because I lived with him, I lit out. Of course, if you don't want me just say so, an' I 'll hit the trail."

Despite his effort to appear nonchalant, the boy's eyes were a little wistful. Hanson nodded.

"I heard somethin' about the rumpus," he said briefly. "I met up with a man from down that

way in town yesterday. How 'd you come to be workin' for a cuss like that?"

A flush crept up into Curly's face. "I—I 've always lived with him ever since I was a shaver," he said in a low voice. "I don't know any more than that; he 'd never tell me. He—he said he was my uncle, but I didn't believe him much. He never acted a whole lot like it."

"Huh!" grunted Bert, his eyes still fixed intently on the boy's face. "I don't know as it makes a whole lot of matter so long as you can punch cows. What name do you answer to?"

A look of relief flashed into the other's face. "Jim," he answered quickly. "Likewise Curly."

"Curly 'll do. We got two Jims already, and that 's aplenty. I pay twenty-five a month. Better skip over to the house an' get some grub. We start for the wagon in ten minutes." He opened the bunk-house door and thrust his head in. "Say, you young loafer," he remarked briefly, "you 'd better get some speed on, or you 'll go out to the wagon empty."

Homer appeared, wearing a look of injured innocence. "How 'd I know it was late?" he complained. "Nobody waked me up."

"It takes a charge of dynamite to do that," Bert flung back over his shoulder. "Better not waste time arguing; we start in ten minutes."

Homer's only reply was a wink at Curly as they hurried into the kitchen. "Everything all right?" he whispered.

Curly nodded. "Sure thing. I 'm going out to the wagon with you."

"Fine and dandy! We 'll make 'em sit up, all right."

There was no time just then for further conversation. Hanson and the others had already finished breakfast, and the two boys bolted their's in a hurry, knowing that he was not a person to be kept waiting. In little more than ten minutes they were in the saddle, heading in the direction of Cottonwood Camp, near which the wagon was located, and where a round-up was to be held that morning.

Curly had left Red Bird in the corral and was riding a sorrel which had been in the string of Sourface, lately departed from the outfit. As he loped along beside Homer, the fresh morning air brushing his face and the rythmical beat of the horses' hoofs sounding in his ears, he could have shouted aloud from sheer joy of living. The care and worry and uncertainty which had weighed upon him were gone. He had found his chum and a job, and for the first time in his life he stood on his own feet without the dragging handicap of another's reputation.

CHAPTER IV

THE CIRCLE BAR

“**I** S’POSE you ’ll have old Sourface’s string,” remarked Homer presently, tilting his hat a little more over his eyes. “They ain’t such a bad lot, either, except Nubbins and Crazy Jane. Sourface was scart to ride them.”

“Broncs?” queried Curly.

“Nope; both of ’em broke last year, but they ’re just plumb batty. You know the kind; as soon fall down an’ roll over you as not, or any other darn fool trick you don’t expect. Say, Baldy, my son; don’t you know better ’n to ride with your hat off? The sun ’ll frazzle your brains pretty quick.”

Baldy looked around with a grin. “Don’t get envious, little one,” he observed patronizingly. “Maybe some day you ’ll have brains enough to frazzle.”

“Huh!” snorted Homer. “I got enough to get along with now—an’ something to cover ’em, too. I ain’t a human billiard ball like some folks.”

“I expect you ’d better drop off here, Kawikee,”

broke in Bert abruptly. "Drive in to Cottonwood, and don't be all day about it."

Kawikee made no remark, but, heaving a little sigh, he pulled off to the right. About a mile further on Baldy left them with similar instructions and the other three rode on alone. Presently Bert pulled up and addressed Homer.

"Better take Curly along with you 'cause he don't know the land yet. Make a clean drive now, and none of your tricks."

"Tricks?" repeated Curly innocently, when they were out of earshot. "Have you got tricks, kid?"

"Of course not," replied Homer virtuously. "I 'm surprised you should ask such a question. Of course, if some of my cattle get mixed up with Bert's or Baldy's, I can't help it, can I?"

"Not without wasting a whole lot of time separating 'em," Curly replied. "And seeing they 're all going to the same place, I don't know that it makes a lot of difference who drives 'em in."

They presently came upon a bunch of about thirty two-year-olds with a few cows among them, and a skillful application of the rope started them running obliquely toward the right, a course which would soon bring them into the territory Baldy was covering.

"There!" observed Homer with satisfaction, as

ne put back his rope. "That 'll give Baldy something to exercise those brains of his on that he's blowing so much about."

Having satisfied this score, the two proceeded to make a clean drive and reached the round-up about ten o'clock behind some two hundred head of cattle. Several of the men were already in and were holding the herd on the edge of a steep draw north of the wagon. Homer and Curly threw their bunch with the rest and took their places on the outside of the circle. Within twenty minutes three more cow-punchers appeared, among them Kawikee, and Bert was not far behind. But it was a good hour before Baldy showed up, hot, tired and foaming with rage at the trouble he had had with some steers which, he declared, were possessed with the devil. Bert's sarcastic comments did not tend to add to his good humor.

Being a new hand, Curly helped hold the cut and found that it was not too engrossing to prevent his seeing everything else which went on. Bert and Poley, his assistant—the "straw boss," he was called—did the cutting out. And as Curly watched them single out a steer and work him out of the herd with swift, unerring skill, he wished he might be doing the same thing. He knew he could n't have done it half so well, but it was far more interesting than his own job, which consisted

merely in seeing that the steers which had been cut out did not run back to the main herd.

It was almost three o'clock before the two-year-olds had all been cut out and the rest of the herd driven off. Two men remained on day-herd duty and the others made a dash for the wagon and their belated dinner. For a time strict attention was paid to the business of eating and there was little or no conversation. But when the meal was over Curly was made acquainted with the other members of the outfit. Chief among them he liked Poley, a tall, lithe, well-set-up young fellow of twenty-five, whose skill at cutting out he had been admiring all morning. He was good tempered and full of fun, but there was the faintest possible trace of reserve in his attitude toward all the other men save two. For Homer he seemed to have a great fondness, while Bert's appearance was always a signal for the beginning of an argument. The subject under discussion did not seem to matter in the least; one was as good as another, and they took opposite sides with the matter-of-fact precision of old cavalry horses falling into line.

Besides the men already mentioned, there was Red, a slim, active fellow of twenty-two, all muscle strung on steel wire, with a freckled face, snappy blue eyes and the reddest kind of red hair. Long

Bill Timmons was lean and lank and taciturn, with skin like leather and a face threaded with a net-work of tiny wrinkles. He was a genuine "old timer," who had passed through every phase of ranch life, from the faraway, easy-going days of the open range to the present systematic, totally changed conditions. His opposite was "Pink" Davis, who had been with the outfit but a month. He was young and green—very green. His chaps were very fringy and very clean and very yellow. His saddle, creaking with newness, had just a few more conchas and saddle strings and fixings than anyone else's. But he was quick and smart and madly enthusiastic and did not seem doomed to remain for long in the tenderfoot class.

Curly found that "Silent" Baynes quite lived up to his name; a more utterly unsociable person the boy had never seen. He was a marked contrast to Celso, the fat Mexican cook, whom everybody liked and whose bubbling, contagious laughter sounded from the wagon at the most unexpected moments. These constituted the outfit, except for half a dozen men in the line camps, and the two who were on day-herd, Sunny Jim and Broncho Tom, who seemed from a casual inspection to be just plain cow-punchers without anything unusual or unexpected about them. Like many of the other men their last names were

shrouded in the mists of oblivion, for on the range no one thinks of calling anyone by anything save a nick-name or an abbreviation.

“Did you see those Lazy X strays, Poley?” inquired Homer, after he had introduced Curly.

Poley tightened the string on his tobacco sack with his teeth and tucked it into the pocket of his flannel shirt. “Sure!” he answered, deftly rolling a cigarette between his slim, brown fingers. “Want the job of taking them back?”

“I certainly do,” returned Homer emphatically. “Only you know right well Bert won’t send me.”

“Of course he won’t if he thinks you want to go. You ’re not very wise yet, kid.”

“Humph!” snorted Homer. “Maybe you think you could work it better.”

Poley’s face lighted briefly with a smile. “I might,” he said dryly. “I ’ve had considerable experience working him.”

He said nothing more, but presently he strolled carelessly around the wagon to where Hanson was laying down the law to Celso.

“Say, Bert,” he drawled, “you ’re not thinking of sending Homer back with those Lazy X steers, are you?”

There was a pause, during which Bert stiffened visibly. “I did have some such thoughts,” he remarked slowly. “Any objections?”

“Oh, no!” Poley’s tone, elaborately detached, held a little undercurrent of disapproval. “Only I thought maybe you could spare somebody else better.”

“I reckon not.” Bert’s jaw squared with the determined firmness of one quite able to manage his own affairs without suggestions. “I ’ll send him and Curly; they ought to be back to-night.”

Though it required some effort, Poley discreetly refrained from speech and walked slowly away whistling. As he came around the wagon, Homer greeted him impatiently.

“Well?”

“Though I strongly advised him not to, he ’s going to send you an’ Curly.” There was a twinkle in Poley’s eyes as he exhaled a cloud of smoke. “He don’t set much value on my advice, does he, kid?”

“You ’re a wonder, all right,” Homer exclaimed admiringly. “Any idea when we start?”

“Could n’t say. Not approving of the business, I did n’t ask questions. Pretty quick, though, if you ’re going to get back to-night.”

Homer lowered one eyelid. “To-night?” he murmured. “Yes, we will!”

There was no time for further words, however, for at that moment Bert appeared and curtly instructed Homer to saddle up at once and drive the

strays over to the Lazy X bull pasture. "It ain't necessary for you to go to Rita Blanca, either," he added significantly. "I 'll tell Bob about it when I see him. And be sure you 're back to-night, 'cause I want to start for Charvis first thing in the morning."

"Sure thing! If I don't have any trouble I ought to be back by nine o'clock." Homer's expression was perfect, though his eagerness to return to duty was a trifle overdone.

Bert grunted unintelligibly, but with a touch of doubt, and walked away. "Take Curly with you," he called back a moment later, "then you 'll be sure of nothing happening."

Homer bestowed a complaisant look on his friend, and without further words they hastened to saddle up and leave camp. It was not difficult to cut out of the herd the five steers which had stayed over from the neighboring outfit, and within half an hour they were on their way. While in sight of camp they proceeded discreetly, but as soon as an intervening knoll hid them from observation their speed increased, and presently the reluctant steers were being rushed past succulent clumps of buffalo grass in a way that was distinctly harassing.

Nothing occurring to detain them, they made the twenty odd miles in little less than three hours

and promptly at seven o'clock reached the southern side of the Lazy X bull pasture. Homer dismounted and deftly pulling the staples with a pair of pliers, made a passage in the fence through which their exhausted charges staggered. Once on the other side three of them promptly lay down, while the other two stood, swaying slightly, a wild expression in their eyes, as if they were unable to understand what had happened to them.

CHAPTER V

THE DANCE THAT NEVER WAS

HAVING accomplished their task, Homer straightened up and stared meditatively across the rolling country. "Wish I knew whether the boys were at Rita Blanca or not," he remarked.

"Some of 'em will be there, won't they?" suggested Curly.

"Sure; but they 'll probably be the ones we don't give a hang about seeing. Might as well chance it, though. We certainly deserve some diversion after hustling that beef along at a two-forty clip."

He led his horse through the gap in the fence and Curly followed. When the wire had been fastened up, Homer mounted and the two headed eastward, riding at a good speed. They had not gone three miles when a single horseman came in sight off to the left, riding obliquely to meet them.

"Wonder who that is?" pondered Homer as they pulled in and waited. "Looks a bit like Jack Clifton."

A minute or two later his guess was confirmed.

With a wave of his hand the horseman slightly changed his course and presently drew rein beside them.

"Hello, Jack," Homer greeted him. "Where 'd you fall from?"

"Just ridin' in from camp," returned the other, pulling off his hat and running his fingers through his thick, brown hair. He was a slim, sun-browned fellow with clean-cut features and a pair of wide, candid, blue eyes.

"Why, you 're all togged out," Homer continued, making the discovery. "Looks like you were going to see your best girl."

Clifton laughed easily. "Lord, no! I wish I had one to see. I 'm goin' to the dance. Ain't you fellows comin'?"

"Dance! What dance?" Homer was all interest. "I did n't hear about any dance."

"Why, at the ranch—Rita Blanca. Did n't they send you word? Ain't any of you fellows comin'?"

"First I heard of it," said Homer shortly.

"That 's funny. Bob said he was going to send over. I reckon maybe he could n't spare a man. It ain't too late, anyway."

"Gee! I can't go this way." Homer looked ruefully down at his greasy chaps and torn neck handkerchief. "Who 's going to be there?"

"Quite a bunch from Channing," returned Jack. "Say; why don't you take a run back an' change your clothes? Then you can bring some of the other boys along.

"Good idea. About ten o'clock?"

"Around that, I reckon. Get back as soon as you can. S'long. See you later."

He tightened rein and rode off, while the two friends, wheeling sharply, started south again. As they flew along they discussed the pleasing news with interest. There had been no dance in the neighborhood for weeks, and Homer was enthusiastic at the prospect of indulging in one of his favorite pastimes. Besides, he had to answer all sorts of questions from Curly and describe for his benefit the good and bad qualities of the various Channing girls who were likely to be there. Consequently, almost before they knew it, they had reached the neighborhood of the Circle Bar wagon.

At once slowing down, they proceeded through the darkness with caution and in silence. Bert had a habit of retiring early, and, as Homer remarked in a whisper, it would be a pity to disturb his rest. This thoughtfulness, however, was wasted. For after tying their horses to a cottonwood three hundred yards from camp and proceeding hither on hands and knees with much dis-

comfort, they found that he had gone back to the ranch house late that afternoon. This information was gleaned from Celso, who sat with his back against one of the wagon wheels playing solitaire by the light of a single lantern. The others had turned in for lack of something better to do. Awakened suddenly, they received the news coldly.

"Who told you?" asked Poley, sitting up sleepily.

"Jack Clifton," responded Homer, pulling off his chaps. "Met him coming in from camp all togged out."

"Hm." Poley looked dubious. "Wonder if he was lying? He most generally is."

"What would he make up a story like that for?" asked Curly.

Poley eyed him quizzically. "You don't know Jack, I reckon. He 'd rather lie than eat. Well, I guess I 'll risk it. Anything for a little excitement."

He got up stretching and began to pull on his clothes. Three others, Baldy, Red and Arkansas, followed his example.

"Ain't you coming, Kawikee?" Homer inquired, as he tied a green silk handkerchief in a fetching knot.

"Not me," yawned the latter. "I 'm too comfortable."

“Quitter!”

“You can’t work me up that way,” declared Kawikee calmly. “I ’ll bet there ain’t going to be no dance, anyway. I ’ll bet it ’s just one of Jack Clifton’s fairy tales.”

“Oh, rats!” snapped Homer. “For five cents, I ’d—”

“Come on, kid,” broke in Poley. “We have n’t got any time to waste if we ’re going to get there to-night.”

Flinging back a last word at Kawikee, Homer followed the others outside. Horses were roped, saddles thrown on in a hurry, and the six men started at a gallop for Rita Blanca. The great harvest moon had just risen, a flaming, crimson ball in the east. The air was balmy yet not too warm. An ideal night for a dance, they decided, as they loped along, laughing, chatting, chaffing each other and occasionally breaking into a chorus of song. Thus the time passed quickly and about half past ten they came within sight of the ranch house standing on a low plateau around the base of which flowed the Rita Blanca creek.

“Don’t see any illuminations,” remarked Red as they rode into the water.

“Maybe they ’re dancing in the moonlight,” suggested Homer hopefully. “It ’s sure bright enough.”

"They 're terrible still about it, then," was Poley's dubious comment.

No one spoke as they rode up the curving trail and reached the level of the plateau. But when they halted at the top the horrid truth was plain to all. The long, low, 'dobe ranch house was lighted only by the moon. The doors were closed, the windows dark; the whole place fairly reeked with silence.

"No joyous revelry to-night," murmured Baldy, reining in his horse.

"Dished, by thunder!" Poley exclaimed.

Homer let out an explosive. "Just wait till I see that son-of-a-gun again," he declared viciously. "I 'll show him—"

"Come away, child," interrupted Baldy softly. "Pretty quick you 'll have our amiable Lazy X friends awake, and then we 'll never hear the last of this. Let 's hike."

They went, quietly, hurriedly, without a backward glance. But once out of hearing they resumed the subject of Jack Clifton and in a short space his personal appearance, his character and ancestry had been discussed and dissected with a warmth and simple directness which left little to be desired. They reached the wagon shortly after midnight, and having turned the horses into the remuda, they hastily sought the tent. As the

first one entered a voice greeted him ironically.

“Did n’t stay long, did you? I thought there was a nigger in that woodpile. Now, if you ’d taken my advice—”

Six minds were seized with but a single thought. Six stalwart forms fell upon the offending Kawi-kee as one. And when quiet was at length restored a considerable portion of their wrath had been satisfactorily worked off.

CHAPTER VI

PEDRO

WHAT little remained of annoyance and chagrin was not long enduring. Within a day or so the incident had been forgotten, and it was not until some two weeks later that it cropped up again, quite unexpectedly.

Curly and Homer had been sent to town on some errands for the ranch. Having carried these out with speed they lingered for an hour or more along Romero's main—and only—thoroughfare, exchanging items of news with various acquaintances, and enjoying the mild excitements of the village until finally obliged to tear themselves away. Less than a mile from town along the trail, they met three Lazy X men coming from the opposite direction.

“Ain't you boys headin' the wrong way?” inquired one of them called Alkali, a loose-limbed tawny-haired giant.

“I reckon not,” returned Homer. “We 've about exhausted the pleasures of the metropolis.”

"Better come back with us and do it over again," urged Alkali.

Homer shook his head. "Can't to-day. Got to get back to the ranch and see that Bert don't do anything foolish."

"All right; suit yourself." Alkali shrugged his shoulders; then a sudden thought seemed to strike him. "Say," he grinned, "I did n't see any of you boys at the dance the other night."

Homer's brown eyes opened wide. "Dance!" he repeated blankly. "Where at?"

"Why, at Rita Blanca. Did n't Jack tell you about it?"

"Oh, *that*! Why, I thought he was joshing. I would n't have missed it for anything if I 'd known you were really having a dance." Homer's voice took on an accent of profound regret. "Next time you fellows want to send word by somebody else," he went on. "Jack Clifton's such a thundering liar you can't ever believe a thing he says."

A look of disappointment flashed across Alkali's face and was gone. "We would have," he explained, "only it was so sudden we did n't have time. Well, so long."

When they had ridden on along the trail, both boys breathed sighs of relief. "That was pretty good stuff, kid," Curly remarked. "You got 'em barking up the wrong tree, all right."



With a scream of rage, the horse dropped his head
and began to pitch

“Uh-huh. I don’t guess they suspect anything. It would certainly be nuts to them if they knew we went. I wish we could get even with Clifton, though.”

As they rode along through the crisp, October air they discussed various ways of accomplishing this end, but reached the ranch without coming to any definite decision. Dismounting at the corral, they pulled their saddles off and turned the horses loose. Then Homer went into the bunkhouse, while Curly started over to the ranch house with some letters for Bert. As he approached the door, it was opened suddenly and a stranger stepped out.

He was a heavily built, spruce-looking man of about fifty, with dark hair sprinkled with gray and a square, florid, clean-shaven face. He wore riding-breeches and puttees, both of which were gray with dust, and in one hand he carried a riding switch with a silver top.

As their glances met, the stranger stopped suddenly, it seemed almost with a start. For a moment he did not speak, but stared at Curly with a curious, frowning intentness which held a mingled speculation and incredulity in its depth. Then he cleared his throat.

“Who are you?” he inquired abruptly.

“One of the hands,” returned Curly briefly.

"I guessed that much," snapped the other sarcastically. "What 's your name?"

The boy shrugged his shoulders. "Harden is my name," he answered. "Jim Harden."

"Ah—Harden," the other murmured. For an instant it seemed to Curly as if his face were a shade less florid; certainly his grip had tightened spasmodically on the riding switch. Then, without further comment he turned abruptly and disappeared into the ranch house.

Curly stared blankly at the door for a moment before he moved on to the kitchen, a puzzled wrinkle in his forehead.

"Say, Celso," he inquired from the doorway, "who 's the guy with the red face and floppy pants?"

The Mexican wheeled swiftly. "Sh!" he cautioned, a fat finger to his lips. "That 's the big boss—Graham. He owns the ranch."

Curly's eyes widened. "Whew!" he whistled softly, thinking of his curtness with a man of such importance. He hesitated an instant and then laid the letters on the table. "Give 'em to Bert, will you?" he said. "When 's supper ready?"

"Six o'clock; no sooner."

Curly sighed and departed for the bunk-house. While he was washing up he pondered a little on

Mr. Graham's odd behavior, but could come to no satisfactory conclusion about it. He finally decided that the man must be a little eccentric, and let it go at that.

Owing to the unexpected presence of the ranch owner, supper was delayed to-night. The furnishing of the table during these infrequent visits of the Chicago man was, in fact, a source of worry to Hanson. If only the ordinary fare was provided Mr. Graham was apt to be put out and declare that there was nothing fit to eat. But if some delicacy were added his remarks on the evils of rich living were equally forceful. Bert had finally solved the problem by having a special dish or two in which the men did not share. To-night, however, he had been obliged to hastily slaughter a calf and its preparation had delayed the meal.

Strange to say, Mr. Graham made no comment at the sight of such lavishness. He seemed, in fact, to have very little appetite, and to be noticeably self-absorbed. Once or twice Curly encountered a rather furtive glance from under the bushy eyebrows, and was merely confirmed in his belief that the man was a "queer duck." Everyone was relieved when he and Bert presently left the table and retired to the office.

"He 's a sociable old geezer, all right," com-

mented Homer, masticating with difficulty the extremely tough veal. "Pedro with a grouch on is about as entertaining."

"You 've said a mouthful," agreed Kawikee. "I wonder if he 's going to stay long?"

"He leave to-morrow," remarked Celso, from over by the stove. "I hear heem say so."

"Well, that 's something to be thankful for," drawled Homer. He put down his empty coffee cup and stretched out his legs. "Anybody heard what 's doing now that the round-ups are over?" he inquired.

He glanced at Poley, but that individual shrugged his shoulders. "Don't ask me, son," he smiled. "You know how I stand with Bert. He don't ask my advice about things; he just tells me what 's wanted when he 's ready. I reckon, though, it 'll be riding fence for a bit and fixing things up generally for winter."

His supposition proved more or less correct. All next day and the following one the punchers spent repairing fences in the neighborhood of the ranch house. During the spring and summer there had been no time to put on them, and many were in pretty bad repair. In some places the wire was down and had to be restrung, while here and there a rotting post made a new one necessary. It was hard work, but not unpleasant, for the

weather was fine, and like the average cow-puncher they accomplished their tasks to the accompaniment of considerable innocent skylarking. Returning at dusk on the second day, they were surprised to find the bunk-house occupied by Pedro, a rather surly Mexican, who for most of the summer had been the sole occupant of one of the line camps located at the extreme end of the ranch, but only a few miles off the trail leading to Channing, the nearest railroad town.

There was some idle speculation as to the reason for his presence here, but Pedro was not one to gratify curiosity, idle or otherwise, and it was not until later that this was relieved. During supper Bert was more than usually taciturn. He hurried through the meal with scarcely a word and then, pushing back his chair, he arose and started for the office. Half way across the room he stopped as though he had suddenly remembered something, and turned slowly around.

“I expect you and Pedro had better go down to Jones’ camp to-morrow and stay there awhile,” he said, addressing Curly. “The fence is in pretty bad shape and I want it fixed up. You can tote some grub down and do it all in one spell.” And without waiting for Curly’s assent, which came grudgingly enough, he disappeared.

“Well, what do you think of that!” exclaimed

Homer on the way back to the bunk-house. "It 's the limit!"

"It sure is!" agreed Curly crossly. "I 'll have a nice time all alone with that Greaser. He 's about as sociable as a porcupine."

"Why the dickens could n't he have sent me instead?" mused Homer.

"That 's easy. He 's afraid we 'd loaf too much. Bert 's no fool."

"Well, it 's a darn shame, anyhow," sputtered Homer. "I was going to see if Poley could n't work him to put us together, but this came so quick there was n't a chance."

Curly stretched himself lazily on his bed. "Maybe he can later on," he said hopefully. "I sure don't want to stay in that forsaken hole for months with a duck like Pedro. I 'd go off my head."

Since it had to be done he was resolved to make the best of it and utter no complaint. But it was very hard to watch the rest of the boys ride off in a body next morning, laughing and chaffing one another, and then to start in the opposite direction, dragging a pack horse behind and accompanied by one of the most disagreeable men in the outfit.

They had not ridden far, however, before it became evident that this was one of Pedro's good days. He at once broke the silence by a commen-

dation of the weather and followed this up by wondering how long it would take to reach camp.

"You know better than I do," answered Curly, as soon as he could catch his breath after this unexpected flow of words. "You 've been there often enough. Say," he went on mischievously, "you 're feeling pretty good to-day, are n't you?"

"Verra fine day," explained Pedro, showing his teeth. "Can no help feel good."

"It sure is." Curly sighed. "I wish—Oh, never mind what I wish. You 're not such bad company, after all, Pedro."

"Sure t'ing," returned the Mexican, with another display of ivories. "Good comp'ny when feel good."

"Well, I hope you 'll stay feeling good."

Curly decided that the Mexican must have been much maligned. He had never laid eyes on him before yesterday, but the description furnished by Homer and Poley did not at all agree with the cheerful, smiling reality before him.

Making a short halt at midday, they reached the camp about five o'clock and found the shack in a miserable state of repair. It was built of 'dobe with a sod roof which was so full of holes that it was surprising anything at all of it remained. The door was off the hinges and the windows empty and shutterless. Fortunately as it

did not rain they passed a fairly comfortable night, but it took them all next day to patch things up enough to make the place livable.

Pedro's good humor continued unimpaired, but Curly soon discovered that he had an extraordinary aversion to work and shirked it at every opportunity. But this had rather been expected, and after the place was patched up, it made little difference to the boy whether Pedro rode his fence or loafed in the camp. They were each responsible for certain sections, and Curly made a point of keeping careful record of his own work.

It was a little irritating, though, to come in at the end of the day and find the Mexican asleep in one of the bunks or dawdling over a game of solitaire, when it was his turn to cook supper. This happened several times before Curly took any active notice of it. But one afternoon, when he came in tired out from a hard day's work nailing up wire and putting in fence posts, the sight of Pedro comfortably snoozing was too much for him and he decided that the thing had gone on long enough.

Carefully closing the door so that the man would not be disturbed, Curly built a fire outside and put on just three potatoes. Then he made coffee and fried a steak, and when everything was done he sat down and ate it without delay. It was all

accomplished with such silence and dispatch that Pedro never wakened, and not until the dishes were washed and put away did he appear in the doorway, yawning and stretching. Then his eye fell upon Curly.

“You late?” he inquired in a surprised tone.

“Late?” repeated Curly. “What put that idea in your head?”

The Mexican waved his hand. “I see no potatoes, no supper—not’ing.”

Curly grinned. “Oh, is that what’s troubling you,” he said airily. “You were sleeping so sound it seemed a pity to wake you, so I cooked supper myself. I ate it, too,” he added with provoking calm. “Just finished now.”

Pedro’s brow darkened. “Where is mine? Did you not cook for me?”

“Not on your life, I did n’t! I cooked yesterday and it was up to you to cook to-day.” Curly’s tone was emphatic. “If you’re too darned lazy to do your share of the work, I’m not going to do it for you.”

The blood rushed into the other’s sallow face and for a moment he stood with clenched fists, glaring murderously at the boy. Then without a word he turned on his heel and went back into the house.

Curly’s face fell. He had quite expected a fight and was rather disappointed when it failed to

come. "I do hate a Greaser," he grumbled to himself. "They never scrap a thing out fair and square. Now, I suppose he 'll be grouchy for a week."

Oddly enough this did not prove to be the case. To be sure, when Pedro emerged from the shack a little later, he cooked and ate his supper in sullen silence. But next morning he was all smiles and had apparently quite forgotten their disagreement of the night before. The two left camp together, and when Curly rode in about dusk he found the fire burning brightly and an appetizing supper well started. Evidently Pedro was one of that rare type of Greaser who could take a hint, he decided, as he sprawled comfortably before the fire afterward listening to the soft tinkle of the guitar; he wasn't half bad company after all. Curly was very sleepy and dozed off several times. He had a faint recollection of finally pulling off his boots and some of his clothes, and tumbling into bed.

That was the last thing he remembered until he suddenly awoke to find himself sitting bolt upright with every nerve tingling and every sense alert. What had aroused him he did not know; nor had he the least idea how long he had slept. It must have been several hours, for the fire had

gone out and not even the glimmer of live coals relieved the inky blackness.

Somehow, as he crouched listening, there seemed something unnatural in the utter stillness of the room, and for a moment he could not make up his mind just what was lacking. Then all at once it came to him. While Pedro did not actually snore, his heavy, irregular breathing was almost as noisy; just now not a sound came from his bed. He must have left the shack, and Curly decided to investigate.

He stretched out one hand to feel for matches in his trousers' pocket, when a faint rustling came from across the room. It was very slight, and ceased almost instantly; but the boy's arm remained suspended in midair and he held his breath, waiting for a repetition.

It seemed hours before it came again, this time a little nearer—a slow, dragging sound that ceased almost as soon as it began. Curly's heart gave a sudden leap, sending the blood racing through his veins, as he realized that someone was crawling stealthily toward him across the hard dirty floor.

CHAPTER VII

THE WAY OF A GREASER

SOFTLY the boy's hand stole under the rolled-up slicker and with a little sigh of relief his fingers closed around the butt of his gun. With infinite care he reached over to his trousers, and, fumbling for a second in the pocket, drew out some matches. Then he listened. The crawling noise had ceased and the overpowering darkness bore down upon him with an actual physical sense of suffocation. Suddenly, with a swift movement, he drew a match across the tarp and as it flared up, he found himself gazing straight into the evil face of Pedro, who was stretched out on the floor not six feet away.

"Drop it, you skunk!" ripped out Curly, leveling his gun. "Drop it!"

His voice was hard and grating, but there was no hint in it of the tremor which went through him as the ugly-looking knife thudded from the Mexican's hand to the floor.

"Keep still!" he commanded, as the other made a movement to rise.

For a moment he did not know what to do. The match was burning out and he dared not lower his Colt to scratch another. Then he remembered the stub of a candle set in an empty bottle which had lighted their evening meal, and with a swift wriggle he slipped away from the clinging blankets, leaped to his feet and backed toward the table. He dared not take his eyes off the Mexican, whom he had well covered. The result was that, a moment later he stumbled over a box with a crash which almost upset him, and the match went out.

Instantly there was a scrambling sound followed by the rush of feet. Curly's finger pressed the trigger instinctively, and the succeeding roar almost drowned the slamming of the door. When he struck another match and lit the candle, Pedro had vanished.

This in itself did not worry Curly much. It was, in fact, the best way out of the difficulty, for it saved him the trouble of holding the Mexican till morning and then taking him back to the ranch. But when he discovered that the other's gun was also missing, his face grew serious, and without delay he blew out the candle and took up his station beside the door to wait for daylight.

It seemed an interminable time before the first faint streaks of light made it possible to gather a few small things into a bundle. Then he opened

the door cautiously and looked out. There was no one in sight, and a swift skirting of the cabin failed to reveal any sign of the Mexican, whose horse still grazed in the small corral with Curly's. Evidently he had been badly frightened, and the boy smiled a little as he pictured the unreasoning panic which had made him abandon both horse and saddle.

After breakfast Curly saddled up and, turning the other horses loose, started back for the ranch house. He knew Bert was not going to be at all pleased at his unexpected return, but that could n't be helped. To stay alone in camp was simply to invite a shot in the back the first time he was off his guard, and that did not appeal to him in the least. It did not occur to him to speculate on the reason for Pedro's murderous attack; he had been too much with Mexicans not to know their capabilities. Instead, as he rode, he spent most of his time wondering whether he would be sent back to Jones camp, and, if so, who would go with him.

Toward nine he reached the ranch, left his horse in the corral and strolled over to the house. As he expected, he found Bert's office deserted so he went on to the kitchen to have a talk with Celso and hear the news. On opening the door he was much surprised to find the sole occupant, a large,

square, totally strange woman of middle age and Celtic features, who was scrubbing the floor with an air of being very much at home indeed. As he hesitated on the threshold, she glanced up and surveyed him with marked disapproval.

“Lord love us—another wan!” she exclaimed, wringing out the cloth. “An’ what do yez be after loafing around at this time of day for, when yez should be working like an honest man?”

Curly was momentarily taken back at this onslaught. “I just came in from camp to see Bert,” he explained hesitatingly.

“Well, ye don’t see him, do yez?” she inquired sharply. “I ain’t got him hid, neither. Times is changed, young man,” she went on with emphasis. “There ain’t no Berts, nor no one else hanging around this kitchen while I ’m cook, exceptin’ at meals.” With much energy she slopped half a pail of water on the floor and scrubbed vigorously with her brush.

Curly’s lips twitched. “Has Celso gone with the wagon?” he asked innocently.

The lady fixed him with a pair of snappy, blue eyes. “Don’t spake his name, the spalpeen!” she cried. “The dirt I ’m after cleanin’ up is a sin an’ a shame. If I had the namin’ of it, I know where he ’d go. An’ the pans a sight, an’ roaches

so thick a body can't step without crunching of 'em. Don't ask me where he is. He ain't here, that 's certain."

"I suppose—" began Curly.

"Now, don't you begin supposin' at this hour o' the mornin'. Just you run over where you belong and that black-eyed mess of imperance will tell you all you want to know. I 'm too busy."

With a surprised exclamation Curly shut the door and raced over to the bunk-house, where he found Homer balanced on a box before the fire busily consuming a large slab of bread thickly spread with butter and sugar. A companion piece lay on the table at his elbow, and Curly pounced on it before the other could collect his wits.

"Here! Come back with that!" exclaimed Homer indignantly. "This ain't no free lunch."

Curly merely grinned at him from behind the table as his teeth made a large semi-curve in the slice. "Pretty good stuff," he mumbled. "How 'd you get it out of the old lady?"

"Asked her, you thieving little son-of-a-gun! Say, what are you doing up here, anyhow?"

"I had a little run-in with Pedro and he lit out, so I came in to see what Bert wants done."

Homer immediately demanded details, and his grievance was forgotten in the interest of hearing all about the difficulty. When Curly finally fin-

ished he expressed the conviction that Pedro would give him trouble yet, and then fell to wondering who would be sent to take his place.

"That 's what I 'd like to know myself," said Curly, stretching himself out on Homer's bed. "Maybe it 'll be you."

"I don't know about that. I 'm due to go down to Freezeout to-morrow with Red. Bert may change his plans, though. Say, how did you like the new cook?"

"She 's certainly a talky old dame. She about took my head off a while ago." Curly smiled at the recollection.

"Her bark 's worse than her bite. All you want to do is to give her a good jolly."

"I thought you must have been applying some soft soap from what she said about you," commented Curly. "When did she come? What 's the idea, anyhow?"

"Oh, it 's old man Graham," explained Homer. "He 's coming down next week with his niece, and thinks there ought to be a female woman about the place. So Bert went down to Channing Tuesday and hired Mrs. Reilly. I 'll give her about one week to run the outfit. She 's got Bert scared of her now."

Toward noon Homer beguiled Mrs. Reilly into giving them a very substantial dinner, and their

diplomatic praise of her cooking still further increased the lady's good humor. They had just returned to the bunk-house and settled down for a comfortable afternoon when Bert unexpectedly appeared. He heard Curly's story through with wrinkled brow.

"You ought to have known better than to rile him up that way," he said severely. "Why did n't you take it easy?"

"Easy!" Curly burst out hotly. "Holy smokes, Bert! Do you think I'm going to lay down and be walked over? I did about three-quarters of the work as it was."

"Well, you might have told him what you were going to do instead of springing it on him. You know how touchy those fellows are."

"Oh, shucks! He would n't have paid any attention." Curly's dander was up and he did n't mince words. "Besides, anybody who'll pull a knife for a little trick like that is n't safe to have around."

Bert walked up and down the room several times and finally stopped in front of the fire. "Well, I s'pose it can't be helped now," he said. "I expect you and Homer had better slip down there to-night, though. You can't tell what that son-of-a-gun might do. How much longer will it take you to fix up the fence?"

“About a week, I reckon.”

“All right. I ’ll want you both back here as soon as it ’s done.” He put his hand on the door latch. “If you run across him don’t start shootin’ if it ain’t necessary. Just tell him I want to see him at the ranch.”

“Where he ’ll get a mild little lecture and be put to work again,” remarked Homer sarcastically as the door closed. “Believe me, that cuss has some kind of a pull around these diggings. He ’s so thundering lazy he ’d sit an’ let grasshoppers eat holes in his pants. Why, if one of us tried to put across the stuff he gets away with we ’d be fired in a jiffy. Well, let ’s get busy. I ’m not ’specially keen about striking camp after dark and getting a shot from the bushes. Run over and get some chuck from Queenie while I pack my war bag. Maybe you can land some of old Graham’s canned fruit. She won’t know any better than to hand it out to you.”

Mrs. Reilly being still in an amiable frame of mind, Curly was able to secure several cans of peaches besides a good supply of more substantial articles. A pack horse was roped and loaded up, and soon after three they departed. Reaching Jones’ camp shortly before dusk, they found plenty of evidence that Pedro had paid it a visit since morning. His saddle and bridle

were gone, and so was everything edible in the place.

“Gee!” remarked Curly, as they surveyed the interior of the shack. “It ’s a wonder he did n’t carry the house off with him.”

“He would have if he could,” returned Homer. “Lucky ’dobe won’t burn. If it had been wood he ’d have put a match to it sure. Say! Is n’t that your bed over there? That ’s funny.”

“He ’s got a better tarp, and Navajo blankets; that ’s the only reason he did n’t swipe mine.” Curly pulled his bed out of a corner and spreading it on the floor found that nothing was missing. “Let ’s get supper,” he went on. “I ’m so hungry I could pretty near eat my chaps.”

That night they took turns watching, but morning came without anything happening. Though they kept a sharp look-out during the day, they saw no signs of the Mexican, though this was not conclusive, since the rough, broken country offered plenty of chance for concealment. That night passed as uneventfully as the one before, and when they returned to camp late the second afternoon, they decided that Pedro must have left that part of the country.

“Though how he did it with his saddle and all, I can’t think,” Homer mused. “Wonder if he could have got hold of a horse.”

“There are plenty of ’em on the range, though it would be hard roping one on foot. Still, he might have managed it.”

“Well, I don’t care how he got away so long as he ’s gone. I might have known we were wasting good time with all this watching. Pedro has n’t any more nerve than a mouse, and it is n’t likely he ’d stick around here taking chances against the two of us.” Homer gave a yawn which threatened to dislocate his jaw. “I move we turn in; I ’m about petrified. We ’ll put a box against the door, so it can’t open without waking us.”

He at once set about making his preparations, while Curly unrolled his bed and spread it out on the floor. It was their habit to air the blankets and quilts in the morning before starting off to work, adjusting the rather complicated arrangement of many folds so that no time would be lost at night.

Curly had, therefore, merely to spread it out flat, peel off his clothes and slip between the blankets, which he did with a luxurious sigh of content. The next instant he gave a yell and sprang up with a convulsive movement which took him half way across the room.

“Judas Priest!” he gasped. “There ’s a snake in the bed!”

CHAPTER VIII

THIRTEEN RATTLES AND A BUTTON

FOR a moment Homer stared at him incredulously. But when Curly caught up a stick of fire-wood, his friend followed suit, and the two hurriedly approached the bed.

“There it is,” Curly said quickly. “See that ridge there?”

Gripping his stick, he raised it aloft and brought it down with force and precision across the slight elevation which looked more like a wrinkle in the tarp than anything else. Instantly there arose a commotion underneath the coverings. Writhing, twisting, thrashing about with extraordinary rapidity, the unseen creature seemed almost to move the entire bed, while the two boys, wild with excitement, rained blow after blow upon it. About two out of three went wild, and for a time those which struck home seemed to have no noticeable effect. But at length the wriggling movements grew slower and more labored, and finally ceased altogether, with only a convulsive squirm now and then to show that the reptile was still there.

Finally Homer straightened up and drew one sleeve across his forehead.

“Whew! that ’s hot work,” he gasped.

“Do you think it ’s dead yet?” asked Curly.

“There can’t be much left of it. Let ’s see what it is.”

Together they deftly jerked off the tarp, holding themselves in readiness for any signs of life. One blanket was pulled away and then another, and the two boys gave a sudden exclamation of astonishment as the mangled, crushed remains of a huge rattler were revealed.

“Holy smokes!” cried Homer. “Will you look at the size of it!”

He poked gingerly with his stick, but only a slight muscular tremor passed through the body. “It sure is one whopper,” he went on. “Thirteen rattles, has n’t it? How the dickens did it ever manage to crawl into your bed?”

Curly gave him an odd look. “It did n’t,” he said slowly. “It could n’t. I rolled that bed up before we went out this morning and have n’t touched it since. Besides, the door ’s been shut all day and there is n’t a hole it could get through. I know, because I stopped them all up when I first came down.”

The other’s face grew serious. “But how—Do you mean it was *put* in?”

"I don't see how else it got there."

"Pedro?"

"I suppose so."

For a moment there was silence as Homer gazed down at the rumpled blankets.

"Gosh!" he burst out suddenly. "A man is n't human who 'd do a thing like that. Suppose it had bit you?"

Curly shrugged his shoulders: he was recovering from the shock of his very narrow escape. "You 'd likely have had to hunt up someone else to chum with," he said lightly. "He 's sure got it in for me, has n't he?"

Homer picked up the snake on the end of his stick and threw it out of the door. "It does n't seem natural for him to be so devilish for such a little thing," he commented in a perplexed tone. "I don't understand it."

"You can never tell with a greaser," Curly remarked. "They 'll nurse a grudge an awful long time. Well, there 's one good thing about it; we know he 's still around and we can look out for ourselves. Let 's turn in."

He pulled the soiled and bloody blankets out of his bed and tossed them into a corner. Then, having fixed the table firmly against the door, he turned in with Homer. The latter was soon asleep, but it was some time before Curly fol-

lowed his example. Try as he might he could think of no plausible reason for the malignant hatred shown him by a man with whom, up to the past few days, he had never exchanged a word. Though he had made light of it, the situation perplexed him not a little, for at heart he agreed with Homer that the episode of the uncooked supper was almost too trivial to be the real foundation of the trouble.

The remainder of their stay at Jones camp was not pleasant. While there were no more visits from Pedro, the constant atmosphere of suspense and the feeling that at almost any time a bullet might be fired at them from some hidden covert was all very wearing and tended to develop rasped nerves and uncertain tempers. But it was also a great stimulus to effort and they both worked to such purpose that when they reached the camp at the end of the fifth day the fence repairs had been completed, to their own satisfaction, at least.

“Lord, I ’m glad that ’s done!” said Homer as he slid from his saddle. “Let ’s start back now. Seems like I could n’t put in another night in this lonesome hole.”

“I ’m with you,” Curly agreed with fervor. “I reckon the cayuses will stand it.”

“Sure they will! They ’ve got to. I ’ll rope Skinny if you ’ll get the stuff out.”

Each performed his part with such expedition that within fifteen minutes they had packed up, loaded the pack horse and were out of sight of camp. With each succeeding mile their spirits rose, and by the time they reached the ranch house at nine o'clock, they were almost hilarious. As they rode up to the corral Bert came out of the house.

"Well! You 're back early," he said as they dismounted and opened the gate. "Fence all right?"

"Sure thing!" Homer answered.

"Did n't take you as long as you thought it would." Bert's tone was suspicious.

"We hustled," Curly explained frankly. "That darned greaser was laying for us, so we did n't waste any time."

"Did you see him?" Bert demanded.

"No, but he left his card." Curly explained the incident of the snake while Bert listened intently.

"Huh!" he commented when the boy had finished. "He always was a worthless critter, but I did n't think he was that bad. He 'd better not show up around here or he 'll get what 's coming to him."

"He sure will," affirmed Homer vigorously. "Say, Bert," as the latter started to walk away,

“I s’pose we can get some grub over at the house.”

Hanson hesitated. “Why, I—don’t know,” he stammered. “Er—ask Mrs. Reilly. She runs the kitchen.”

The darkness hid a delighted grin that overspread the boy’s face as he bent down and hoisted his bed to one shoulder.

“Will you listen to that!” he whispered. “She ’s got him well trained.”

“All in a week, too,” Curly snickered, as they turned toward the bunk-house.

Entering, they dropped their bundles on the floor and were greeted by the assembled punchers.

“Ha! The prodigals’ return,” chuckled Baldy, from his place beside the fire. “Welcome to our city.”

“It sure is great to be here.” Curly dropped down beside Poley with a sigh of pleasure. “I don’t want to see that blooming camp again as long as I live.”

“Nothing the matter with Jones camp,” declared Kawikee. “Freezeout ’s a lot worse.”

“You never camped there with Pedro, I reckon,” Homer put in significantly.

“Hence these lamentations,” murmured Poley. “What have you done with our amiable friend? I thought I missed his smiling countenance.”

“Huh!” snorted Homer. “You won’t know his

smiling countenance if he shows it around here. We 'll change that map of his so there won't be a ghost of a smile left."

"What the deuce is up, anyhow?" drawled Baldy. "What happened? It's like pulling teeth to get anything out of Bert."

"Did n't he tell you anything about it?" sputtered Homer. "Well, listen here."

He at once plunged into a graphic account of the events of the past week, which was listened to with the greatest interest. When he had finished Pedro's chances for a speedy taking off, should he ever show his face on the range, were remarkably good.

"What I want to know is where he went," Kawi-kee spoke up. "There ain't a—"

"Holy smoke!" Homer broke in, springing up. "I plumb forgot grub. I was wondering why I felt so queer. Wait a minute."

He dashed out of the bunk-house and over to the kitchen where, from the absence of light, he judged that Mrs. Reilly had retired. Stepping carefully so as not to awaken her, he made a rapid but thorough search and accumulated a goodly store of eatables which were quickly consumed by Curly and himself. Very soon afterwards everyone turned in.

There was the usual rush for breakfast next

morning and as usual Homer was late. As he entered, Mrs. Reilly was in the midst of a vehement tirade against some person or persons—happily for them, unknown—who had raided her store-room. Homer at once plunged into the discussion, brazenly applauding her remarks, and bitterly condemning the thieves. The meal over, Poley left for one of the camps, while Kawikee and Baldy hitched up the mules and started for town to get supplies. Not having any particular instructions from Bert, Curly and Homer were slipping quietly out of sight, when Hanson spied them.

“Hold up there a minute,” he called. “I expect you fellows had better get out some rope and make hackamores for a spell. I want you to start in on the broncs to-day, but I won’t have time to help you round ’em up ’till about eleven.”

Without comment, the two walked slowly over to the tool-house and leisurely dragged out a coil of rope which they carried around to a sheltered spot on the sunny side of the wagon shed. Settling down comfortably, they braided hackamores for an hour or more, enlivening the occupation with talk. Then Homer sought Bert for further instructions, leaving Curly alone.

For a time the latter braided industriously, his fingers doing the work mechanically with his mind busy on anything but the work at hand. His

thoughts were miles away when all at once, quite close to him, a soft voice broke the stillness.

“I beg your pardon, but would you mind saddling up a horse for me?”

CHAPTER IX

THE SHOT IN THE DUSK

AS he turned his head swiftly with a look of startled surprise, Curly's eyes met those of a young girl who stood beside him. The sight was so unexpected, and she was so very pretty, that his presence of mind quite forsook him, and he sat gazing stupidly at her, a hot flush spreading slowly over his face.

The girl bit her lips and gave a little exclamation. "Oh!" she said. "I thought— Why, I've never seen you before."

Curly scrambled to his feet and pulled off his hat. "I just came in from camp last night," he stammered, looking helplessly down at the hackamore which dangled from his hand.

"Oh, that's it." Her eyes danced a little. "How very bold you must have thought me when we've never been introduced. My name is Dorothy Graham; sometimes the boys call me Jack."

"I'm Curly—that is, Jim Harden," he said slowly. "I'm sure glad to meet you." Quite

suddenly the amusing side of it struck him; his eyes crinkled and his lips twitched. "You certainly gave me a shock," he confessed, tossing the hackamore to the ground. "I—I'd heard you were coming, but nobody told us last night you were here. What horse do you want?"

The girl laughed merrily. "You did look—surprised," she said. "Oh, any one that does n't pitch."

"Don't you care about any particular one?"

She smiled at him in a friendly fashion which yet held no trace of forwardness in it. "Yes, of course I do. I'm crazy about Topsy; I rode him a lot last spring. Mogul's a nice beast, too, but I'm used to never having the same one twice. They're always somewhere else."

Curly smiled a little. "You're sure in hard luck," he said. "Topsy and Mogul are both out in the remuda, but I reckon I can find you a pretty good mount."

He took his rope and they walked over to the corral where, as he expected Kawikee and Baldy had left the horses after rustling the mules that morning. Looking them over, he decided on Rags, one of Bert's string, and roping him he led him out of the corral and threw on the saddle. He was just putting the bridle on when Homer strolled

around the corner whistling. Catching sight of Dorothy, he stopped abruptly, jaw dropping.

“Why, Jack!” he burst out. “Excuse me—Miss Graham. I didn’t know you’d hit the ranch.”

The girl shook hands with evident pleasure. “Uncle and I came down day before yesterday,” she explained. “You’ve been out at camp, haven’t you?”

“Just came in last night. Are you going to stay a while?”

“About a month, I think. Uncle has to go to Galveston, but he says I can stay till we go back home for good. All ready?” She turned briskly to Curly.

“Y-es, I reckon so,” he replied hesitatingly.

She seemed so slim and young and frail in her short divided skirts and tiny riding boots that he wondered if she could manage Rags who was n’t always as quiet and well behaved as he looked.

“Quite sure you can handle him?” he went on anxiously, shifting his hold on the bridle reins.

Homer burst into a shout of laughter. “Don’t worry, kid,” he cried. “She can ride anything on the range.”

The girl said nothing, but taking the reins out of his hand, she gave him a smile and a quick,

reassuring nod. The next moment she was in the saddle handling the spirited animal with the ease and grace of a perfect rider.

“Gee!” exclaimed Homer suddenly. “I clean forgot. Bert wants us to saddle up right away and round up some brones to break.”

“Splendid!” the girl broke in. “And I ’ll go with you. I was just wondering what I should do; it ’s so stupid riding alone.”

A look of doubt appeared on Homer’s mobile face. “That would be bully—er—Miss Graham,” he began. “But I don’t know what Bert—”

“Bother Bert!” Dorothy exclaimed emphatically. “I ’m going. And look here, Homer Elkins; what do you mean by calling me Miss Graham? I noticed it a minute ago, too. You never called me that before, and I don’t see why you should begin now.”

“Why—I don’t know,” Homer stammered. “You seem to have grown up all of a sudden. I thought maybe you might n’t like Jack.”

“You silly boy.” Her tone was almost maternal. “Of course I like it; I don’t want you boys to call me anything else. It ’s my hair, you know,” she explained, patting the knot at the back of her neck. “I ’ve put it up. Of course I ’ve grown some, but it ’s mostly the hair. Uncle said it did n’t make me look a bit different, but I know

better.” There was a note of extreme satisfaction in her voice.

Homer grinned. “Right you are. I ’ll call you Jack ’till you ’re fifty, if you want me to. Well, s’pose we get busy and surprise Bert. He won’t be any better tempered if he ’s kept waiting.”

The idea was good, but belated. As they started for the house they met Hanson coming to look for them.

“Wonder you would n’t take all day,” he grunted; then he caught sight of the girl. “Hello, Jack; going for a ride?”

She smiled at him captivatingly. “Good morning, Bert. I thought I ’d come along with you boys if you don’t mind.”

The Circle Bar boss evidently did mind, but seemed afraid to say so. He fidgeted with his reins, tested the stirrup leathers and finally fixed a scowling glance on Homer, who sat looking patiently at nothing with a very detached expression.

“Why—er—I don’t believe you ’d like it,” he stammered at length. “It ’s pretty rough work.”

“Oh, I don’t mind that. It will be lots more fun than riding off by myself somewhere.”

“We ain’t likely to get back till late,” suggested the other, grasping at a straw.

“That won’t matter; I ’ve only just finished breakfast.”

Suddenly her mouth drooped pathetically. "Of course if you don't want me, Bert, just say so right out and I'll go away alone." Two reproachful gray eyes were raised to his, and Bert instantly capitulated.

"I didn't mean that, Jack," he said hastily. "Of course you can come if you want to."

Having gained her point, Dorothy instantly became all smiles, and as they turned northward she was bubbling with good spirits. Tucked away in her mind, however, was a note of the effectiveness of pathos; it might be useful in another emergency.

They halted for a moment at the bronc pen while Curly and Homer tied back the gates. Then all four started at a lope for the west gate of Vega pasture, a section some eight miles square in which grazed the bronses and those horses which were unsuited for everyday use. This was much too large to permit the singling out of any particular animal, so that when bronses had to be broken the entire herd was driven back into the bronc pen and the selection made there.

A short twenty minutes brought the party to the gate, and having passed through and fastened it again, they started across the field at a rapid canter. Scarcely half a mile from the east fence flowed Vega Creek, and along its banks where the grass was most plentiful, the majority of the

horses were gathered. As soon as they reached the head of the creek they split up. Curly crossed and rode down the east side some little distance from the bank. Homer did the same to the west, while Bert and Dorothy, keeping well to the rear, followed the stream closely.

From this formation the horses naturally fled southward and presently encountering the fence, they followed it until they were all huddled together in the south-easterly corner of the pasture, not far from the gate into the home pasture and the bronc pen. At this point Homer spurred forward, opened the gate and then retired a little ways from it. The others slowly closed in behind the horses, who, with much snorting and startled backing and filling, began to straggle through the gate. Once in the smaller pasture it was a simple matter to drive them into the bronc pen, the gate of which was already open.

“It seems a great deal of trouble to go to just for a few brons,” Dorothy remarked as she watched the eighty odd horses running wildly about in an effort to escape from their cramped quarters.

“It ’s a nuisance,” agreed Homer. “But I don’t know any other way to get them.”

For a space she sat silent watching Bert, who had entered the pen and was deftly wielding his

rope. "Gracious!" she exclaimed suddenly. "Why, he 's letting them all go again."

"That 's all right," Homer assured her. "He 's got the two he wants. We can't break more than two at one time."

"Very likely not, but I should think you 'd catch a dozen and keep them shut up till you want them. Mercy! I feel hungry."

It was after two when they reached the ranch house, and no one lost any time washing up and seeking the kitchen.

"Where 's uncle?" Dorothy asked as she took her seat.

"Sure, an' he 's et his dinner this two hours an' gone for a ride," Mrs. Reilly informed her.

"Did he say where he was going?"

"He did not—nor any other worrd." Mrs. Reilly slapped a dish down on the table with a toss of her head. Evidently Mr. Graham had not been communicative.

"Very likely he went to look after some of the cattle." With which comment Dorothy dismissed the subject from her mind and devoted her attention to dinner, though this did not prevent her from keeping up a running fire of comment with the two boys which lasted throughout the meal. Bert was silent, and there was an absent look in

his eyes and a puzzled frown on his face as he swallowed his food mechanically. He was thinking of the ranch owner's remark that morning that he could n't make an inspection of the ranch that day since he had work enough to keep him busy till dusk. At length, when the other rose from the table, he looked up with a start.

"What are you boys going to do?" he asked.

"You want us to tackle the brones, don't you?" sighed Homer.

"One of you 'll do with me to help." He turned to Curly. "I wish you 'd take a look through Vega pasture and see what 's become of them three brones I showed you a couple of weeks ago. You remember 'em, don't you? The ones I want broken for my mount—two buckskins and a black. We missed 'em this morning, and I expect you 'll find 'em over to the west side."

"All right." Curly hunched his chap belt higher. "What 'll I do with them?"

"Nothing. Just see if they 're all right. They generally run with the rest of the bunch, and I thought they might have got cut on the wire, or something."

Curly picked up his hat and started for the door. As he glanced toward Dorothy her eyebrows went up and her face suddenly became such a perfect

interrogation point that he almost laughed aloud as he nodded. She followed him quickly and Homer came behind.

“I sure got the worst of that deal,” he grumbled. “Breakin’ brones all afternoon while you go on a nice outing. I s’pose you ’re going along,” he added to Dorothy.

“Of course. Do hurry, Curly, or Bert will come out and tell me I can’t go.”

In the face of such a possibility they lost no time in mounting and riding off. Cantering across the home pasture, they passed through the gate of the larger enclosure and, turning to the left, skirted the western side. While Curly kept a sharp lookout for the missing horses, Dorothy chattered on in her eager, interested way and before very long was possessed of every item of information, important and otherwise, which Curly could think of regarding his own life, besides volunteering almost as many things about herself.

She was an orphan, both her parents having died when she was very young. Since then her home had been with her uncle in Chicago, but two or three times every year they made stays of varying length at the ranch. She adored the life there.

“I ’d like to stay here always,” she concluded. “I never get tired of it as I do the city. It ’s all

so wonderful and big, and people are more friendly. I do wish uncle would settle down here for good, but I suppose he could never stand it. He does n't seem to care for it the way I do."

She sighed a little and was silent. Presently Curly gave a sudden start and pulled out his watch.

"Phew!" he whistled. "After five. We'd better hustle. I had no idea it was so late. It'll be dark in less than an hour."

He had been so interested in their talk that he had quite failed to notice how low the sun was. They had made a circuit of the western portion of the pasture and located the two buckskins but not the black. There was no time for this now, however, and hastily turning, they started back at a gallop. Presently the sun sank behind a gorgeous mass of low-hanging golden-purple clouds, and in a very short time the swift southern twilight began to fall.

"I do hope we're not going to be caught very far out," Dorothy said anxiously. "I don't care much about riding in the dark; you feel so uncertain."

"I'm afraid we will, though," Curly said contritely. "And it's all my fault, too, never noticing the time."

"Nonsense, it was my talking," laughed the girl. "I always talk too much. What 's that shed just ahead of us?"

"Vega camp," Curly answered. "Don't you remember we passed to the east of it this morning? They don't use it now; this part of the fence is looked after from the ranch."

They were almost opposite it now—a long, low, 'dobe structure with shuttered windows and the single door half open which gave a more than ordinary impression of desertion and decay.

"I don't care for it," the girl said as they swept past the crumbling front. "It looks frightfully lonesome."

All at once she stiffened in the saddle and caught her breath with a sudden, swift intake. "The door!" she gasped. "It moved!"

Curly drew his horse closer. "Nonsense," he said soothingly. "It couldn't move. It's the shadow that makes it seem so. There's no one—"

Crack! It seemed as though the pistol had been fired at his very elbow. Something struck his hat and carried it away. He reached swiftly for his gun, but there was another shot, and a sudden, burning pain like the searing of a red hot iron bit through his shoulder. At the same instant his horse reared straight up with a maddened snort



A sudden burning pain like the searing of a red hot iron bit
through his shoulder

of terror, wavered in the air a moment and fell backward, throwing him a dozen feet away. A scream, shrill, terrified, rang in his ears for an instant, and then the world was blotted out.

CHAPTER X

WOUNDED

THE first thing which made any definite impression on the boy in his hazy, chaotic state of slowly returning consciousness was a voice, faint, soft, and seemingly far away, which kept repeating something over and over again with monotonous regularity. At first it was just a sound; then slowly the meaning came to him.

“I won’t cry! I won’t cry!” Then there was a strangled sob. “*I won’t cry!*”

In a flash Curly’s mind cleared. It was quite dark and he was lying on his back upon the ground. His head ached and throbbed and so did one shoulder. Also someone knelt beside him fumbling with the collar of his flannel shirt. Then all at once, with a quick tightening of his throat, he remembered.

“Jack!” he whispered anxiously. “Are you hurt?”

“O-h!” She gave a shuddering sob. “I—I—thought you were—killed.” There was another sob, stifled in the middle as she fought for self-control. “I must n’t cry!” she murmured.

There was another pause and when she spoke again only the suspicion of a tremor showed in her voice. "Curly—where is it? Where did he shoot you?"

"In the left shoulder," Curly answered. "It is n't bad."

He tried to raise himself, but his swimming head and an unwonted sense of weakness made him drop back again.

"What shall I do?" Dorothy asked quickly.

The boy thought a minute. He must have lost a lot of blood, he reflected, to make him feel like this. "Do—do you s'pose you could cut off the sleeve and tie it up?" he asked at length. "That 'll stop the bleeding."

"Yes," she said briefly. "Where's your knife?"

He found it in one pocket and held it in his teeth while he opened the blade with his right hand. She took it silently; he could feel her fingers slip through the unbuttoned collar, and then came the soft snip, snip of the knife cutting through flannel.

"I 'll cut it close up to the collar," she said presently, "so there 'll be plenty of room."

Curly made no reply. The uncomfortable dizziness warned him that he must save all his strength for the journey back to the ranch. So

he lay quite still while the girl finished cutting the sleeve and drew it down over his arm.

“Now for the bandage,” she said. “Does it hurt very much?”

“Hardly at all; it’s just a dull pain. I don’t believe it’s even broken.”

“That’s good.”

There was a ripping sound that betokened the ruin of a petticoat. Then she turned back to him and he could feel the tips of her fingers travelling lightly over his shoulders. He knew the instant she located the wound by the stifled gasp she gave, and realizing how hard it all was for her, he ground his teeth in bitter resentment at his helplessness.

“It’s a beastly shame, Jack,” he burst out. “I wish you did n’t have to do it.”

“Hush,” she whispered. “I did n’t mean that. I was thinking how much it must be hurting you.”

“It does n’t,” he protested. “Really it does n’t. As soon as it’s tied up I’ll be all right.”

Without further words she went on with the bandaging, making a soft pad first to place against the wound, and fastening this tightly in place with long strips of stuff. She did it so effectually that Curly lay with hands clenched and gritted teeth until it was over. When a sling had been improvised with his silk handkerchief, the girl

dropped her hands in her lap with a deep sigh.

"Now what?" she asked.

"I reckon we 'd better start back to the ranch," Curly said. "It 's a beastly long walk, but we can't stay here."

"Walk? Why, Rags is here."

"He is? Are you sure?"

"Certainly. He did n't run at first, and when I got off I threw the reins over his head the way you boys do, and he 's stayed here ever since."

"That 's bully!" exclaimed Curly. "Now you can ride and I 'll walk alongside and hold onto the saddle."

"Absurd!" declared Dorothy. "I won't ride. There 's nothing the matter with me."

"There 's nothing the matter with my legs, either."

Curly's tone was firm. He had decided that there had been quite enough coddling for the present, so he stuck to his point. At length they reached a compromise by which each would take a turn on the horse, and having settled that Curly rose slowly to his feet.

As he did so he staggered and involuntarily caught hold of the girl's arm. His head swam and there was a whirring in his ears. He wondered whether he had struck a rock in falling. At length he managed to reach the horse and caught hold of

the stirrup. As he stood there, breathing hard and trying to clear his fogged brain, he suddenly missed something.

“Where ’s my gun?” he asked abruptly.

Dorothy hesitated an instant. “I—I ’ve got it,” she said. “I ’ll put it back in your scabbard.”

While she was doing this he watched her dully.

“Did it fall out?”

Again there was a barely perceptible pause before she answered.

“No, I took it.”

“Why?”

“I thought he— Oh, I thought I might need it. Come, do get on Rags, Curly, and let ’s start.

“I ’m not going to ride first.”

“Curly—please!” she entreated.

“I ’m not going to ride first,” he repeated in precisely the same tone.

Without another word she hastily mounted and when he had taken a good grip in the stirrup leather, they started slowly in the direction of the ranch.

To Curly the details of that interminable journey ever afterwards remained a fogged and hazy memory. He seemed unable to think, or plan, or direct. All he could do was to hold on like grim death and try to fight off that hateful dizziness and weakness which threatened to over-

power him. His feet were like lead, and at almost every step he stumbled.

At length when it seemed as if they had been going half the night and must surely have passed the ranch house in the darkness, Dorothy halted and slipping down announced in a firm tone that they had made half of the distance and that he must ride. He was too weak to protest and presently, without knowing exactly how he got there, he found himself swaying in the saddle, holding tightly to the horn, while the girl walked alongside with one arm raised to steady him.

There came another indefinite interval, Curly did not know how long or short. He remembered vaguely a fence with a gate in it which the girl opened and shut. Then he found himself watching a firefly bobbing about in front of him which behaved oddly and after a time seemed to be growing larger. He wondered dully why there were no others to keep it company. The whirring in his ears began to sound strangely like the beat of a horse's hoofs. Then, all at once, the firefly turned into a lantern carried by a white-faced man on a big roan, who came madly out of the darkness and pulled up with a jerk that raised a cloud of dust all about them.

"Dorothy!" gasped the man in a queer, strained voice. "Dorothy! Are you safe?"

Then, into the boy's clouded brain came a realization that it was Mr. Graham. It did not seem odd that he should be here, but Curly wondered why he had left his hat behind, and why one of the boys had not come along with a spare horse. In thinking about this he missed the girl's reply and it was Mr. Graham's voice that caught his attention again. There was a very curious quality about that voice, almost as though some great emotion—fear or rage or horror, was tearing him to bits inside and showing a little on the surface when he talked.

"I did n't know—" he stammered, drawing one hand across his forehead. "I had no idea you were here. What on earth induced you—"

He broke off and turned suddenly on Curly. Anger was the dominating emotion now—anger pure and simple.

"Get off that horse!" he exclaimed furiously. "What do you mean by letting my niece walk, you cowardly—"

"Uncle, be still!" cried the girl sharply. "Can't you see he's wounded—shot. He can hardly stand."

A sudden wave of bitter humiliation swept over the boy. What could he have been thinking of to sit that horse and let a girl walk? She had said he could n't stand; he'd show them. He kicked

one foot out of the stirrup. Confound that beastly noise in his head! The ground, too, seemed to be moving up and down in a most extraordinary way.

He raised himself weakly in the saddle; somehow he got his leg over. Before the girl realized what he was doing, he stood beside her for a single, brief moment. And then, quite suddenly, his knees crumpled under him and he slid down into a heap at her feet

CHAPTER XI

MYSTERY

“**H**E must have heard us through the door,” said Homer, tilting the chair against the wall and hooking his spurs under the rung. “Baldy had been asking where Jack was and as I was telling him I heard a noise outside and got a glimpse of Graham beating it away from the bunk-house. In half a minute we heard a horse going like mad, so we all piled out and followed, thinking something was wrong.”

Curly moved uneasily on the narrow iron bed. “He had a lantern, did n’t he?”

“Sure. Grabbed it up from the steps where Poley ’d left it. We followed him by that. When we got up to you I was so plumb surprised I just yawped for a spell. There was you looking like a corpse, with your head in Jack’s lap, and she trying to fix the bandages and crying like the dickens. Old man Graham was standing alongside just glowering at the two of you. It was Poley who whirled in and took hold. He sent back to the ranch for a couple of blankets and we carried you in on those and put you to bed.”

Curly lay thoughtfully silent, for a moment or two. "Did—did Graham say anything about how he happened to—know where we were?" he asked presently.

"I heard him telling Poley that he heard the shots while he was coming through the home pasture, but not knowing anyone was out there he didn't pay any attention to 'em. It was only when he heard us telling about you and Jack that he got excited and hustled out."

"Hm," murmured Curly. "Seems funny to hear gunshots and not think anything of 'em. Still— How 's Jack?" he broke off.

"She was about all in that night, but she picked up pretty quick. Looks a little peaked yet, though."

Curly made no comment, and presently Homer let down his chair and stretching out his legs thoughtfully inspected his spurs.

"I don't s'pose you could see who fired the shots?" he asked after a moment's silence.

"No, I could n't, or I 'd have told you before."

Curly's tone was a trifle pettish. His shoulder pained him and the pillows were n't comfortable. Besides, he was tired of lying in bed, even though it was a real bed in the ranch house instead of his own collection of blankets and tarp spread out on the floor.

“Did n’t you even get a glimpse?” persisted Homer.

“How could I with my back to the cabin? I don’t even know whether it was man, woman or—” He stopped abruptly as something flashed into his mind. “Gee! I ’d forgotten that.”

“What?” Homer was agog with interest.

“I ’ve got an idea that Jack saw him. When I came to she asked me where *he* had shot me; and afterwards I found she ’d taken my gun out of the scabbard. I reckon she was afraid he might follow up his fine work.”

“I could have told you that much,” said Homer decidedly. “It was a man, and a big one, if you can tell anything from the size of his feet. The dust in the cabin was all tracked up when we went out yesterday morning. He must have been there for quite some time.”

Curly was silent for a moment. “Pedro ’s got small feet,” he remarked presently.

“They were n’t Pedro’s feet,” Homer said emphatically; “leastwise, not his boots.”

“I s’pose he could have other boots on.” But there was no conviction in Curly’s voice.

“He could, but it ain’t likely. He would n’t think of it. Besides, where would he get the boots. I wonder—”

A light tap on the door interrupted him, and Dorothy's voice was heard outside asking if she might come in.

"Wait a minute," said Curly hastily, with a hasty glance around the room. "Say, kid, throw those clothes under the bed, and put the tray on the table, and—oh, gee! Never mind. The place looks like the deuce, but I can't help it. Just pull the blankets up a bit, and don't touch that blamed shoulder or I 'll explode."

Homer did as he was requested without causing any outbreak, and then opened the door. Dorothy hesitated an instant on the threshold, and then came quickly to the bedside. And as Curly looked into her face, still a little pale and worn, with shadows under the eyes which forty-eight hours of rest had failed to obliterate, a lump rose in his throat making speech for the moment impossible.

"How 's the invalid this morning?" the girl asked with a smile, taking his hand in her firm, cool fingers.

"Fine," Curly said. He hesitated an instant. "I want to thank you, Jack," he went on in a low tone, "for—"

"Please don't," she broke in quickly. "You must n't thank me. I only tried to do what one of the boys would have done, and was n't very suc-

cessful at that." She gave his hand a squeeze and the smile came back. "You don't look a bit comfortable."

"I 'm not," confessed Curly. The pillows—"

"Of course," she interrupted briskly. "They 're all in a heap. Mrs. Reilly, I suppose?"

He nodded.

"She 's a splendid cook," the girl went on, "but I can give her points on this sort of thing. Lift him up, Homer, while I fix them. Easy, now."

Homer complied gingerly and the girl shook out the pillows and deftly arranged them at a smooth angle. Curly sank back with a sigh of relief. "That 's bully!" he said. "My neck was bent all out of shape."

"Say, Jack," Homer broke in, "did you see who fired those shots?"

Dorothy did not answer at once. She seemed to be thinking rapidly and the bright smile faded from her face. "When the first shot came," she began, speaking slowly with her eyes downcast, "Rags jumped to one side and turned completely around so that I faced the cabin door. There was—a man crouching there, his gun aimed at us. As I looked he fired again and Curly fell, and I think I screamed. It was dreadful!"

She covered her face with her hands as though

trying to shut out the memory of that moment. It was Homer who broke the silence.

“Was he tall or short?” he probed gently.

Dorothy’s hands dropped to her lap. “Tall—quite tall,” she said. “Though he bent over his hat reached nearly to the top of the doorway.”

“Did you notice how he was dressed?”

“Not especially. Very much as you boys, I think.” Her fingers locked and interlocked nervously. “His hat was pulled over his face; it was broad brimmed with a square top. I don’t think he wore chaps.”

“Did you see where he went?”

The girl sprang up and crossed to the window where she stood looking out. “No,” she answered without turning around. “When Curly fell I thought he ’d been killed, and I was almost crazy. I tumbled off Rags and went over to where he lay, and then it suddenly struck me that the man might—might do something more. I was nearly frightened to death and pulled Curly’s gun out of the scabbard and looked around. But there was no one there; he had gone. I—” She wheeled swiftly and both boys saw that her eyes were moist and her lips trembling. “Don’t let’s talk about it any more,” she begged. “I—I’ve been trying to forget it ever since.”

“What a beast I am,” Homer exclaimed contritely. “I won’t say another word. I was so anxious to find out that I didn’t think a bit about how you were feeling.”

The girl smiled tremulously but with obvious relief. “I know you didn’t,” she said. “And I know I’m a perfect fool to feel this way, but I can’t help it.”

“Mother of Heaven! Are yez here yet worritin’ a sick lad with your talk,” exclaimed Mrs. Reilly from the doorway. “Be off with yez!”

She advanced with a heavy tread, flopping her apron as though they were chickens. Homer fled at once, while Dorothy lingered to argue. But neither her expostulations nor Curly’s made any impression upon the good woman.

“Not a worrd,” she said firmly. “A half hour yez was to have an’ ’tis now two be the clock. Away with yez!”

Having ejected the visitors, Mrs. Reilly proceeded to clean up the room, moving about with an ostentatious stealthiness and making her remarks in a penetrating whisper which so rasped Curly’s nerves that he wondered if she would never go. But at last she was finished and, partly drawing the shade, departed with much squeaking of shoes and rustling of starched petticoats.

Left alone, Curly lay for a long while in puzzled cogitation. As soon as he had been able to think about the shooting at all he had naturally laid it at Pedro's door. It did seem almost incredible that a man's mind could be so distorted as to lead him to such lengths merely to revenge a petty slight, but the thing had been possible. Now, with Pedro out of it, Curly was utterly at sea. What enemy had he who would go to such lengths and take such risks? Above all, what was the motive? Once there flashed into his mind a memory of Mr. Graham's face as he had first seen it that night—pale, distorted, horrified. But though he had disliked the man from the first, and felt that dislike returned, he could not for an instant bring himself to believe him capable of such an outrage. And even were that remotely possible, the question of a motive loomed big and insoluble as ever.

More than once during the days of convalescence which followed, the problem was in the boy's mind, puzzling and mystifying. Even when he was up and about with his arm in a sling, it remained to vex him, a subconscious sort of thing apt to pop up at unexpected times and places. It troubled him much more than did the possibility of a second attempt against him following the first. That was

something tangible, a thing to be faced and dealt with when it came—if it ever should, and he lost no sleep over it. The other was a mystery, and mysteries of that sort are rarely pleasant.

CHAPTER XII

MR. KERNS ARRIVES

“UNCLE will be back Thursday,” remarked Dorothy from her seat on the toprail of the bronc pen.

Curly straightened up from the saddle he was repairing. “That so?” he drawled, hitching up his chap belt.

“Yes. I had a letter from him this morning saying that he was leaving Galveston Wednesday night.”

The boy was silent for a moment. “I s’pose that means you ’ll have to go home pretty soon,” he said, after a while.

Dorothy sighed. “I ’m afraid so. I ’ve never been here so long at a stretch before and I suppose I ought to be thankful, but I ’m not—particularly. I notice one is n’t very often thankful about things which are over and done with.”

Curly laughed. “You ’d probably be more thankful if he said you could stay another month.”

“I certainly should,” she agreed emphatically. “I ’d be so thankful it would be like being in church.” She sprang lightly to the ground and shook out her skirts.

“Well, you ’ll have the summer to look forward to,” Curly remarked, as he hoisted the saddle on his shoulder and started for the gate. “You generally come down in June, don’t you?”

“About then. But think of being cooped up in the city all that time. It ’s horrid!”

“What ’s horrid?” inquired Homer, appearing at that moment. “Curly been abusing you?”

“No, silly, of course not,” she retorted. “Uncle ’s coming back to take me home, and—oh, dear! I forgot the worst of it. He ’s bringing a friend along and says I must be very nice to him. I don’t think I care much for uncle’s friends,” she continued thoughtfully; “at least, most of them.”

She remained in a brown study until they reached the wagon shed where Curly hung up his saddle. Then she looked up suddenly.

“Heavens!” she exclaimed. “I hope to goodness it ’s not that awful Kerns man. I hate the sight of him.”

“What ’s his trouble?” asked Homer grinning.

“Oh, he ’s detestable; and the most stupid person I ’ve ever seen. Well, I won’t be nice to him, so there!” She stamped her foot with vigor. “Nobody can make me nice.”

“I would n’t like the job if you were set on being the other thing,” Homer said slyly.

“Probably he is n’t the one at all,” Curly put in. “Let ’s forget it and go for a ride.”

The suggestion was favorably received by the others and in ten minutes they were racing southward over the prairie.

In the bunk-house that night there was quite a gathering. Poley and Red had come in from one of the camps and Baldy was also present. The announcement of Mr. Graham’s impending arrival was received coldly. He was not a favorite, and his brief trip to Galveston had been the cause of much satisfaction to them all. The fact that a friend was accompanying him aroused more interest, as the arrival of a stranger always does on a ranch, and there was considerable speculation as to who or what he might be.

That he was a person of some consequence became evident when Bert returned next morning. No sooner had he read the letter from Mr. Graham which awaited him, than he requested Mrs. Reilly to prepare one of the extra rooms in the ranch house for a guest. Moreover, while this was being done he inspected the process several times, though always assuming the elaborately careless air of one just glancing in while happening to pass by. Mrs. Reilly, however, was not deceived and her gorge rose at this exhibition of distrust in her ability. At his third appearance she laid aside

her broom and faced him with arms akimbo.

“Well, Mr. Hanson,” she said sharply, “an’ what might yez be wantin’?”

“Er—nothing, Mrs. Reilly,” Bert answered hastily. “I was just passing, and—”

“Passin’, is it?” sniffed the good lady sarcastically. “Do you think it’s a phool I am? If you ’re afraid I ain’t able to do me work proper,” she went on with some heat, “I ’d recommend ye to turn it over to somebody else.”

Bert felt the perspiration standing out on his forehead. “Not at all, Mrs. Reilly, not at all,” he stammered. “I—I only thought—er—Mr. Graham’s friend, you know—”

Mrs. Reilly folded her arms over her ample person and a sardonic smile appeared on her face. “Mr. Graham’s friend, indade!” she snorted. “Mebbe you ’d like lace curtains hung up in the winder, an’ a gilt lookin’-glass an’ some oil paintin’s on the wall. It ’s a pity, now, ye did n’t think to bring home some Brussels carpet to save his feet, and—”

But Bert had fled before the torrent of words, and Mrs. Reilly resumed her work, an expression of satisfaction on her face. Several times during the next hour, however, she frowned, and from her pursed lips there issued muttered comments re-

garding Mr. Graham's friend that were far from flattering to that individual.

Directly after breakfast next morning, Homer was given instructions to harness up the grays and be in Romero to meet the morning train from Galveston. He grumbled perfunctorily, but it was evident that he was far from displeased at this chance of getting to town, and of having the first glimpse of the much discussed stranger. Indeed, as he rattled out of the corral, it seemed to Curly and Dorothy, who watched him, that he had taken on quite an air of superiority.

"Wait till he comes back," remarked Dorothy with emphasis. "If it's that awful Clarence Kerns, he'll be worn to a frazzle."

Three hours later the two were in the harness room, Curly mending a bridle and Dorothy perched on a nail-keg watching him, when a tremendous clatter arose outside. Hastily rushing to the window, they beheld the returning wagon careening on two wheels as it rounded the sharp turn at the foot of the rise leading to the ranch house. Homer was in front, driving with reckless abandon. Behind sat Mr. Graham smoking a cigar in scowling silence, and a tall, thin young man with a nose like a beak, clad in an ulster of appalling loudness. He sat well forward, his arms on the back of the front

seat, and seemed to be carrying on an animated conversation with Homer, who looked extremely sullen and unhappy. Dorothy took one look at them and then stepped quickly out of sight.

“It ’s him!” she gasped, with small regard for grammar. “I felt it in my bones.”

Curly saw them drive up to the ranch house, where the two men stepped out. Mr. Kerns paused a moment, apparently to finish some remark, and then disappeared inside, leaving Homer to drive frantically toward the corral. A few moments later he burst in upon them, dropped the harness in a heap on the floor, and sank down on a horse blanket.

“Help!” he gasped. “Fan me, kid. I ’m all in.”

While Curly obliged him, Dorothy’s face took on an expression of extreme demureness. “Did you have a nice drive, Homer?” she asked sweetly. “And how do you like Mr. Kerns?”

Homer merely glanced at her in silence. It was a very expressive look.

“You don’t mean it?” Dorothy gurgled. “As bad as that? I hope he didn’t talk a great deal.”

“Talk!” burst out Homer. “He did nothing else all the way from town. I never heard anybody talk so much and say so little in all my life.

And such darn-fool questions you never heard out of a grown man. You might have warned a fellow, Jack," he went on reproachfully.

"Did n't I say he was awful?" she demanded. "Did n't I say I hated the sight of him? But you would n't believe it, and now you 've found out for yourself. He 's a pest!"

"You 've said it!" agreed Homer with conviction. "The only fun I see we can get out of him is to tell him thundering stories every time he asks a question."

Dorothy's face brightened at the suggestion. "That 's a good idea," she said. "He 's such an idiot he 'll believe anything. Only we 'll have to be careful when uncle 's around; he 'd stop us."

"What did your uncle bring him down for, anyhow?" put in Curly.

Dorothy did not answer at once. "I 'm not quite sure," she said at length, a pucker in her forehead. "He 's got loads of money, I believe, and it may be uncle 's trying to get him to buy the ranch. He 'd like to sell it, you know, if he could get the right price."

"But you don't want it sold, do you?"

She shook her head vigorously. "Of course I don't; it would be simply hateful not to have this to come to. But—but what I want, or don't want does n't make any impression on uncle in—in busi-

ness matters. He knows I love this place, but I 'm afraid just the same he 'd sell it the first chance he got without—thinking of me at all."

For a moment both boys were silent. Then suddenly Homer laughed. "It 's up to us, then," he said quickly, "to make things so darn unpleasant here for Mr. Kerns that he 'll never want to see Texas again, let alone buy a ranch and settle down—eh, Jack?"

Her lips curved in a smile. "It—it might help," she agreed. "Only we mustn't overdo it."

"Trust us. Gee! Isn't it 'most dinner-time? I 'm starved."

They slipped into the house by the kitchen door and, finding dinner already on the table, hastened to wash up. They had barely finished when the door into the hall opened and the two men entered, followed by Bert. Mr. Kerns at once spied the girl and advanced hastily with hand outstretched and an ingratiating smile on his narrow, sallow face.

"Well, me little gell!" he exclaimed. "And how are you? More like a blooming rose than ever, bah Jove!"

Dorothy gave him the tip of one finger. "I 'm pretty well, thank you," she said frostily.

"D'you know, I believe you 've grown," Mr.

Kerns went on, looking her over. "Yes, positively—I believe you have."

"It 's quite possible," Dorothy answered composedly, slipping into her chair. "One does grow. Will you sit over there, Mr. Kerns."

"But really now! In six months?"

"Is it that long since I saw you last?" the girl asked. "Why, it hardly seems—"

She stopped abruptly and her lips twitched. Happily Mr. Kerns did not seem to notice the break. He was engaged in surveying the kitchen through a monocle which was attached to his person by a wide black ribbon.

"Quite chawming—yes, really quite!" he remarked. "Rough, of course, but simple—chawmingly simple."

At that moment Curly's glance fell upon Mrs. Reilly, who stood directly behind Mr. Kerns' chair, her head cocked a little to one side and her eyes intently regarding the geometrical parting of his thin blond hair. Her expression was such an extraordinary mixture of amazement, incredulity and disgust that the boy choked suddenly and burst into a prolonged fit of coughing. By the time he had recovered, the good lady had retired to the stove with sundry tossings of the head and movements of her lips, but fortunately without speech. From the glimpse he had had of her face, how-

ever, Curly decided that this self-denial was merely temporary.

“And what do you do with yourself all day?” Mr. Kerns was inquiring.

“Oh, lots of things,” Dorothy answered vaguely. “We ride, and—” she shot a swift glance at her uncle who was deep in conversation with Bert. “We ride, and round up cattle,” she went on rapidly, “and break broncs.”

Mr. Kerns was visibly impressed. “And what are broncs?” he asked.

“Those are the wild horses of the plains which have never been ridden,” Dorothy explained seriously. “They have to be broken to the saddle.”

“But I say, now!” he protested. “Such rough work for a gell!”

Her limpid eyes grew wide with innocence. “It is hard work,” she said simply, “but I like it.”

Homer’s face turned suddenly scarlet with suppressed emotion.

“My word!” exclaimed Mr. Kerns. “Extraordinary! Eh? Coffee? A little later, me good woman, in a small cup.”

“We have no small cups.” Mrs. Reilly’s voice was adamant.

“Oh, very well; leave it.”

The cup was deposited on the table with an emphasis which caused a small tidal wave to inun-

date the saucer, and Mrs. Reilly retired with an eloquent snort. There was a brief pause—extremely brief—before Mr. Kerns veered suddenly to another topic.

“Dinner at noon,” he murmured. “Chawm-ingly simple! Now I suppose you get up pretty early.”

“Yes, fairly early.” Dorothy’s tone was demure. “Breakfast is on the table at five.”

Mr. Kerns was horrified. “Five o’clock!” he gasped. “But, d’you know, I never got up at five o’clock in all me life?”

“Really?” Dorothy inquired. “How odd!” She appeared to ponder over the thought. “Well, being a guest, perhaps you won’t have to. Mrs. Reilly will keep breakfast for you; she’s very accommodating.”

She looked suddenly at that lady, who stood by the stove, hands on her hips, taking in the conversation with every appearance of interest. As Dorothy caught her eye—Mr. Kerns’ attention being momentarily diverted—the girl deliberately winked. For an instant Mrs. Reilly’s gaze was fixed on hers in staring bewilderment. Then a dawning smile of satisfied understanding spread slowly over her face, and as she opened the oven door she began to hum a little tune under her breath.

CHAPTER XIII

THE BAITING OF CLARENCE

“**A**ND—er—just pick out a tame one, me good fellow.”

“Sure thing!” Curly shook out his rope with suspicious eagerness.

Somehow Mr. Kerns' voice lacked its customary assurance. He was, in fact, obviously ill at ease as he stood near the corral watching the horses which Homer and Curly had just driven in. The feeling that he was not properly garbed could scarcely have been the cause of this condition, for Mr. Kerns' equipment was quite the latest thing from Bond Street. To be sure, the ordinary onlooker might have found the baggy riding breeches, the patent leather boots and close-fitting cutaway somewhat out of keeping with the place and the conditions, but such an idea never occurred to Mr. Kerns. In his mind what was fashionable in London must be correct anywhere, and his thoughts were centered, not on his clothes, but upon his probable mount. And as he watched the plunging, rearing, kicking mass of horseflesh in the corral, he was conscious of a disagreeable sinking of the diaphragm, and found himself wishing

that he had not been quite so emphatic in boasting of his ability as a horseman.

However, it was too late now to back out. He could only make the best of a bad job, and trust to luck to come out of the scrape with some few shreds of reputation remaining. Dorothy stood beside him chatting unconcernedly, and when Homer brought out Rags, she took the reins from his hand, turned the stirrup, stuck in her toe and swung herself into the saddle with the unconscious grace and practised ease of second nature.

Mr. Kerns was aware of an envious pang as he observed this out of the tail of his eye, but the next instant all his attention was centered in Curly, who had entered the corral, rope in hand. With bated breath he watched the boy approach a group of horses crowded into the far corner, saw him give the rope a limbering swing or two, and with a gasp beheld it slide neatly over the neck of a roan, whose looks and actions he disliked more, almost, than any animal he had ever seen.

The saddling, however, was accomplished with ease and Mr. Kerns ventured to breathe again. Perhaps he had misjudged the brute. The animal could n't help his looks, to be sure. By the time Curly led him out, he managed to assume a non-chalance he was far from feeling as he took the reins from the boy's hand.

“Quite a rangy animal, bah Jove!” he remarked. “A bit furry, but— Whoa, you beast! Whoa, there, I say!”

While talking, he had carelessly placed his hand on the cantle of the saddle and quite naturally the animal gave a startled leap away from him, pulling the reins out of his grasp. Fortunately Curly had been rather expecting something of the sort, and grabbed them in time.

“I think you ’d do better if you stood by his neck and turned the stirrup,” he said seriously. “You have to watch them pretty carefully in mounting.” And he illustrated briefly.

Mr. Kerns picked up his cap which had been jostled off. “You don’t say!” he remarked, settling it firmly over his ears. “Deuced odd way, y’ know.”

He tried it, however, and was successful in scrambling into the saddle and getting his stirrups. Then he began to fumble with the bridle reins, being quite unable to decide what to do with the long, dangling ends. He was still engaged in this problem when he happened to loosen up on them, and the horse gave a sudden jump forward which threw him half out of his saddle and caused him to clutch wildly at the animal’s neck for support.

Dorothy’s face assumed an expression of pleased

interest. "Really, Mr. Kerns," she cooed, "I had no idea you were so fond of animals. It's quite wasted on the horses about here, though. I used to try and make mine love me, but it was simply impossible."

By this time Mr. Kerns, much flushed, had resumed a vertical position and gave up trying to do anything with the reins save keep a tight hold on them. His right hand rested on the saddle horn, whose possibilities as an anchor had just occurred to him.

"My word, yes!" he stammered. "Quite impossible, I see. Not like me own cobs at all."

Curly and Homer joining them at this moment, they all started off at a lope. For the first few moments Mr. Kerns swayed perilously from side to side, but thanks to his clutch on the saddle horn, and to the smooth easy gait of the cayuse, Ranger, he retained his seat.

The two punchers had business in Vega pasture, but it was quickly finished and they all rode on rather aimlessly westward. Suddenly Homer pulled up.

"Let's go and have a look at Black Devil," he exclaimed. "You never saw him, did you, Jack?"

"Black Devil? No. What is he—a horse?"

"Yep. He's a beaut, too, but a regular outlaw

and just as bad as they come. I don't know why Bert keeps him, except that he's such a good looker."

"All right, let's go. Where is he?"

"In the old corral down by the orchard," Homer answered. "Bert keeps him there because he killed two or three of the stock when he was loose here."

With one accord they wheeled southward and in about ten minutes came in sight of the old corral, an enclosure of some twenty acres which had been little used of late owing to its inconvenient distance from the ranch house. Riding up to the fence, they scanned the interior closely for a glimpse of its occupant.

"There he is," Curly said presently, pointing to the far side. "He's feeding by that cottonwood."

The words were scarcely spoken before the horse turned and started toward them at a run. And as he came nearer, head high and splendid mane and tail tossing in the wind, they could see the play and ripple of great muscles beneath the satiny, coal-black skin, and note the long, easy, powerful stride with which he covered the ground.

"What a beauty!" Dorothy exclaimed. "What a perfect beauty! Oh, I should love a horse like that."

Homer smiled grimly but said nothing. On came the horse, straight as a die, and without perceptibly slackening his pace until he was within a few feet of the fence. Then he stopped short and, rearing to his full height, brought his forefeet against the top rail with a crash which cracked it from end to end. At the same time he uttered a neigh, so shrill and vicious, so full of rage and fury, that the girl shrank back instinctively, while Mr. Kerns almost tumbled from his saddle in surprise.

Finding that he could not get through the fence, the outlaw screamed again and tore up the ground with his hoofs. Then, wheeling about, he seized hold of a fence-post with his bared teeth and began to worry it, shaking his head from side to side, with ears laid back and blood-shot eyes rolling hideously.

Dorothy turned her horse swiftly. "Come away—do!" she urged in a low tone. "I can't bear to see an animal behave that way."

They followed her, and for a few moments rode in silence. This was broken by Mr. Kerns, quite with the air of one making a discovery.

"I say, though!" he exclaimed. "What a monster!"

"He sure is," Homer agreed. "He's earned his name, all right."

"I wonder why Bert keeps him," Dorothy mused. "Surely no one could ever ride him."

"Well, I should n't say quite that," Curly remarked. "I never yet saw a horse that somebody could n't ride."

Dorothy looked unconvinced. "It does n't seem possible to me. Could *you* do it?" she asked pointedly.

Curly hesitated. "I think so," he said at length. "I certainly would n't be crazy about it, but I 'd make a try at it if I had to. He really is n't as bad as he looks. A lot of it 's bluff, you know."

"He 's quite bad enough," the girl said decidedly.

Then she suddenly remembered that Mr. Kerns had enjoyed a rather lengthy respite, and started at a gallop which continued, with a brief intermission at the gate, until they were back at the ranch house. The three kept well together, but Mr. Kerns trailed behind, stirrups flopping, bouncing about in the saddle and giving short, breathless gasps as he clung to the horn with both hands. When they stopped suddenly at the kitchen door, he executed a neat parabola and landed against the side of the house with such force that Mrs. Reilly appeared to inquire if they meant to bring down the roof over her head. For-

tunately he escaped with a few minor contusions, but his nerves were in such a condition that he was obliged to retire for the remainder of the afternoon to rest.

CHAPTER XIV

BLACK DEVIL, OUTLAW

ALL that afternoon the men straggled in from the line camps in twos and threes, for Bert had summoned them to the ranch to make ready for the spring work. At suppertime the kitchen was well crowded, and the presence of the owner and his guest had little effect on the babel of talk as everyone compared notes with everybody else and heard all the news that was going. There were occasional pauses, to be sure, and during one of them Dorothy looked over at Bert.

“Why do you keep Black Devil, Bert?” she asked.

“Why, I don’t know.” Bert looked rather surprised. “I don’t like to shoot him, and you can’t sell him. Of course nobody ’ll ride him.”

“Could n’t he be broken?” the girl asked eagerly. “Curly says he could ride him.”

Mr. Graham turned his head suddenly and glanced at the boy, who was talking to Poley. Then his eyes fell to the plate in front of him. Bert smiled.

“Maybe he could,” he said grimly; “but I have my doubts.”

“It seems a shame that such a beautiful horse should have such a dreadful temper,” Dorothy continued. “I wish something could be done with him.”

“It is too bad,” Bert agreed. “But I ’m afraid he ’s too old to learn anything now.”

Mr. Graham suddenly roused himself and turned to his friend. “How would you like to have a little riding contest to-morrow, Clarence?” he asked with great heartiness.

Mr. Kerns turned pale. “Why—I— Really, I ’m afraid I shall be too—er—stiff to ride for a couple of days,” he said hastily.

“Oh, I don’t mean that,” Mr. Graham explained. “I had in mind a sort of exhibition of bronco busting and that kind of thing by the men, now that they are all here.”

“Ripping—positively ripping!” the other exclaimed. “My word! I should enjoy nawthing better.” In the exuberance of his relief Mr. Kerns would almost have welcomed a performance of untamed lions in the kitchen.

“Good.” Mr. Graham turned to Bert. “I guess you can get up something of the sort, can’t you?”

“Why, I reckon so,” Bert replied in a dazed

sort of way. He had not yet recovered from his astonishment at the ranch owner's unwonted geniality. "We 've got plenty of brons we can round up in the morning. I was thinking of giving the wagons a good overhauling to-morrow, though."

"Oh, never mind that." Mr. Graham positively oozed good nature from every pore. "That will do next day. Give them a holiday to-morrow; they 've earned it."

The news of the proposed contest aroused great interest amongst the men and was the sole topic of conversation in the bunk-house long after the usual time for retiring. After breakfast next morning half a dozen punchers rounded up the brons, picking out ten or a dozen of the worst which were turned into the corral. About two o'clock everyone trooped out to the bronc pen to enjoy the fun. As judges, Mr. Graham and Bert took up their places on a couple of barrels placed against the fence. The spectators gathered about at favorable points, even Mrs. Reilly bringing out a chair from the house in which she settled herself close to the rails on one side.

While every cow-puncher in the outfit had entered, one after another dropped out until the contestants finally dwindled to three—Poley, Homer and Curly. They had each ridden three times

without having been thrown. Homer started the next round by roping a small sorrel which he thought he knew, but he soon found out his mistake. The fifth jump sent him, saddle and all, over the horse's head and he retired ruefully with many vows to cinch up tighter another time. Poley tried next and managed to hold on for twice as long before he, too, was thrown. Then Curly mounted and stayed on for six minutes, during which period the horse tried every trick in the calendar to dislodge him, in vain. Finally Mr. Graham held up his hand and Curly leaped to the ground and with Baldy's help pulled off the saddle.

"Curly wins," the ranch owner said with a smile. "And I congratulate him. I have a little surprise up my sleeve," he went on. "Last night I determined to offer an additional prize of fifty dollars if the man who won the first contest could ride Black Devil for five minutes. I understand Harden does not consider this a very difficult feat." He smiled again, with a touch of scepticism not altogether pleasant.

For an instant no one spoke. Then a low murmur of surprise arose among the men. Curly's face turned a shade less brown, for a curious thought had just flashed into his mind. He knew that Mr. Graham disliked him; he had felt that

from the moment of their first meeting. There had even been times, especially since the mysterious shooting, when he wondered whether there was not something more than mere dislike in the man's feeling for him. The possibility was vague, with nothing more than instinct to support it, but instinct has a way, sometimes, of hitting the mark, and Curly wondered now whether this business of riding the outlaw horse had not been introduced for the sole purpose of bringing about his humiliation and downfall—or even worse. His eyes narrowed as he met Mr. Graham's gaze.

“Well?” questioned the latter.

Curly still hesitated.

“Of course you 're not obliged to.” There was a subtle sneer in the man's voice. “If you 're afraid, I have no doubt there are others who are not so timid.”

The words had precisely the effect which was, perhaps, intended. Curly's chin went up and he looked steadily at his employer.

“I 'm not afraid,” he said quietly. “I 'll ride him if you want—or make a stab at it, anyhow.”

“Fine!” exclaimed Mr. Graham. “Now we shall see some riding. Bert, just take a couple of men and bring the horse out.”

Bert complied rather dubiously. It was not an easy nor pleasant task, but he managed it some-

how, and appeared half an hour later with the reluctant outlaw dragged along by three ropes held by as many mounted cow-punchers. Whenever he made a rush at one of them, the others held him back, and by the time they reached the bronc pen, he was like a mad thing. Once inside, he was thrown and held down while Curly's saddle was placed on his back. Then the boy came forward and, taking the bridle reins, straddled the saddle and gave the word to throw off the ropes.

He had not been boasting when he expressed his belief that he could back Black Devil. It was a simple fact that he *could* ride if he could do nothing else. He had been with horses as long as he could remember and had broken hundreds in the course of those years with Jerry Harden down in Midland County. He seemed, in fact, to have a decided talent for that sort of thing, and he found a good deal of pleasure in doing the work thoroughly and as humanely as possible. But at this particular moment he was far from confident or assured. Though he strove to hide his nervousness and succeeded very well, his heart was thumping unevenly and it seemed to him as if the breathless pause which followed the freeing of the outlaw would never end.

In reality it was very brief. For an instant only the splendid creature lay panting, and then

scrambled to his feet. As he did so Curly shot his toes into the stirrups and hung his spurs into the cinch. He had barely done so when the horse reared straight into the air and deliberately flung himself backward. The boy was off like lightning and on again as the animal stood up. Then, with a scream of rage, the horse dropped his head and began to pitch, and such pitching most of the men had never seen before. He pitched straight, he "sunned his sides," he leaped into the air with a whirling motion which turned him half way round. He tried a dozen different tricks in almost as many seconds, and then suddenly he sprang into the air and fell backward again.

There was a shriek from Dorothy, a groan from the eagerly watching men, as the cinch of Curly's saddle parted suddenly while the horse was in mid air. Instead of springing free, he fell with it and the next instant the heavy bulk of the animal crashed downward across his body.

Scrambling to his feet, the horse dashed toward the fence and struck at it viciously with his hoofs. Then he wheeled savagely, with red, flaring nostrils, and seemed to be aware for the first time of the unconscious boy lying tangled in his saddle. He stretched his neck out, his ears pricked up, and then he began to walk slowly forward.

"Oh!" Dorothy gave a cry and caught Mr.

Graham's arm. "Uncle! Tell them to shoot the beast."

Mr. Graham hesitated, his face strained and white, a curious touch of indecision in his eyes. Suddenly the horse gave a scream of rage and, baring his teeth, made a vicious downward lunge.

"Homer—shoot him!" the girl cried frantically. "Quick, shoot him! He 'll kill—"

The words trailed off into nothingness. She swayed against Baldy, who stood beside her, and before he could catch her, she had crumpled into a little heap on the ground.

CHAPTER XV

THE FACE IN THE MOONLIGHT

AS the girl fell, Homer and Poley both pulled their guns and the sharp crack-crack sounded simultaneously. For a moment the horse stood as if turned to stone. Then slowly—very slowly, as his legs gave way—he sank to the ground. He made no sound; only his eyes showed dumbly the terror he could not understand. There was a brief, desperate struggle to regain his feet; a sudden rush of crimsoned foam. And finally, with a long-drawn sigh, the muscles relaxed, the shapely head fell back and he lay silent.

Instantly the corral was plunged into a turmoil of noise and movement. Three or four of the men, reaching Curly, tossed the saddle aside, and lifted him from the ground. Some one was calling vociferously for water, and above the din Mrs. Reilly's voice could be heard, shrill and instant, demanding the same thing. She sat on the ground with Dorothy's head in her lap, and as she cried for water her hands were busy mechanically chafing the girl's wrists. Mr. Graham had stepped

down from the barrel and stood hesitating by the fence. His hands opened and closed nervously, and little beads of perspiration dotted his forehead. Presently, Kawikee appearing with a pail of water, Mrs. Reilly dashed some of it in the girl's face, and with a gasp and a shiver the latter opened her eyes.

"There, there, me darlint!" soothed Mrs. Reilly. "It 's all right. They shot the brute."

Dorothy struggled into a sitting posture and mechanically put her hands up to her hair.

"Curly?" she whispered. "Is he—" She stopped abruptly, but her eyes questioned fearfully.

"Stunned a bit, me dear," the other assured her, "but nothing serious. He 'll soon come round."

Oddly enough, her words spoken at random to quiet the girl, proved to fit the facts exactly. Happily for Curly the saddle had fallen on top of him and formed such a complete protection from the heavy body of the horse that he escaped with only a few bruises and a crack on the head which had caused him momentary unconsciousness. The deluge from Kawikee's bucket brought him around almost as soon as it had Dorothy.

Mrs. Reilly, having assisted the latter to a chair, happened to meet the ranch owner's glance. For a

moment she returned it steadily, her lips pursed up. Then she sniffed.

“’Tis not over quick ye are in makin’ up your mind,” she remarked directly. “Had they waited for your word to shoot, I ’m thinkin’ there ’d be little left of the poor bye by this.”

Mr. Graham flushed and his lips parted impulsively. But apparently he changed his mind, for without a word he turned and walked away, leaving Mr. Kerns, who had been an interested and amazed spectator, eying the cook severely through his monocle.

“But I say, me good woman,” he began, adjusting his glass. “Such language, you know, to one’s employer—”

Mrs. Reilly thrust her chin forward and stood with arms akimbo. “Don’t talk to me,” she admonished heatedly. “I ’m not your good woman. I scorn it! If you was only a man instead of full of monkey tricks— *Stop that!* I ’ll not have it!”

Her last remark referred, evidently, to Mr. Kerns’ exasperating trick of eying her through his monocle with an air of much superiority and condescension. For as she uttered the last words—the temptation apparently proving too strong—the good lady reached forward suddenly and plucked the glass from his eye with such force that the ribbon broke. Throwing this scornfully

to the ground, she turned and, helping Dorothy to her feet, led the girl toward the kitchen door.

“’Tis me Oirish temper, darlint,” she explained in a semi-apologetic tone when they were inside the house. “Likely I ’ll get the sack, but I cannot abear the monkey tricks of him. And who is he to be bringin’ me to task, I ’d like to know?”

Dorothy laughed a little nervously. “He is awfully trying, and I don’t blame you a bit,” she said. “Don’t worry about being fired, though. Uncle would never do that as long as I ’m here. When we ’re gone, I suppose you ’d leave anyhow.” She paused and smoothed back her hair absently. “I think I ’ll go and lie down till supper,” she went on. “It ’s been a—a perfectly hateful afternoon.”

Curly himself felt in much the same way, though he would have expressed it differently. As soon as he could escape the congratulations of the men on his close shave, he went over to examine the saddle. Homer joined him, and on turning it over they saw that the latigo had parted under the strain.

“I was wondering if we ’d find it cut,” Homer remarked after they had made a thorough inspection.

Curly stared at him. “Cut?” he repeated slowly. “Who ’d cut it?”

“You ’ve got me. I haven’t any more idea than one of those brons there. But it sure does seem as if you ’d been running into hard luck too much lately for it to be all pure accident.”

The other said nothing just then. Shouldering his saddle, he left the corral and carried it over to the wagon shed. There he dumped it on the ground and, straightening up, glanced at his friend.

“I ’ve had that same thought myself, kid,” he said quietly, “and it ’s had me working my brain overtime.” He leaned back against a wagon wheel and, plucking a straw from a crack beneath the footboard, began to chew it meditatively. “Four separate and distinct things—pretty darn disagreeable things—have happened inside of a few months, and they ’ve all happened to me. The first two I could lay to Pedro, for you can’t ever tell what a greaser ’ll do when he ’s mad. But Pedro was n’t in that shooting, and for the life of me I can’t figure out who was. And then along comes this. Now it might have been just a plain accident, but—”

“And again it might n’t,” cut in Homer abruptly. “Do you know what I think, old top? I ’ll bet that stuff Graham got off about the winner of the other competitions riding Black Devil was

all rot. I 'll bet if you had n't been the winner he would n't have opened his head about it."

"You mean he wanted *me* to ride Black Devil," mused Curly. "Well, I thought of that, too. I 've thought of a whole lot of things since that business out in Vega Pasture. But what 's his object? What 's he got against me, anyhow? For the life of me I can't make sense out of it at all."

"Me neither, but it 's sure darned queer. Going to fix that saddle to-night?"

Curly nodded. "Guess I 'd better if there 's time before supper. Bert 'll probably want to start extra early to-morrow to make up for our loafing to-day. You rip the end off and I 'll get a piece of leather out of the harness room."

Homer set to work on the saddle and his friend crossed the wagon shed, passed through the barn beyond and stepped into the harness room. He had to hunt around for some time before he found the sort of leather he wanted in the midst of a pile of odds and ends in one corner near the window. But having secured this and a shoemaker's needle and stout thread, the two boys made short work of the broken latigo, finishing the job about the time supper was ready.

Dorothy was not present at the meal. She had

developed a headache and was staying in her room. But Mr. Graham sat in his accustomed place and neither of the two boys could see that his manner varied a hairsbreadth from the usual. Always reserved, he seemed no more nor less so than usual, until, perhaps, at the end of the meal, when he paused beside Curly and handed him a small roll of bills.

“There ’s your fifty, Harden,” he said curtly.

The boy stared up at him in surprise. “But I did n’t ride him five minutes, did I?” he asked doubtfully.

The ranch owner’s hard glance met his squarely. “Pretty close to it,” he answered briefly. “It was over four, and then I lost count for a moment when your girth broke. I guess you won it, all right.” He turned away, and then glanced back over his shoulder. “Feeling all right again?” he asked.

“Sure thing. All I got was a knock on the head. Er—thank you.”

Mr. Graham made no answer. He scarcely seemed to wait for the boy’s reply, in fact, before the words were uttered he had reached the door into the hall. As this closed behind him the two friends glanced at one another, then rose and followed the other men toward the bunk-house.

“Pleasant disposition,” commented Homer softly. “How he must hate himself.”

“He certainly is a grouch,” agreed Curly. “He didn’t act as if he had anything special on his mind, though. Hanged if I know what to think about it all!”

“Same here. The only thing I can see is for us to keep our eyes and ears open for the rest of the time he’s here. He’s leaving in a few days, so Bert says, and it’ll be pretty hard for him to put across anything in that time if we’re on the watch.”

Curly’s brow was puckered with annoyance. “It isn’t that that bothers me,” he said. “If a thing’s open and above board you know where you stand and can plan accordingly. It’s this everlasting mystery and guesswork and beating around the bush that gets me. If I was sure Graham had it in for me, I could easy enough cut out and get a job somewhere else—though I’d sure hate to think of never seeing Jack again. She’s one peach of a good fellow. Well, let’s forget it for to-night, anyhow.”

But fate was not destined to bring him forgetfulness, either that night or for many a long day afterward. After an evening of lazy lounging before the fire, the majority of the men started to

turn in about half past ten. Homer and Curly lingered a little longer to finish a discussion before following their example, and it was at the moment of pulling off his shirt that the latter made an unpleasant discovery.

“Thunder!” he exclaimed, feeling in the breast pocket. “I ’ve gone and lost my roll.”

“Your roll? Gee! You don’t mean that fifty the boss gave you?”

“No, that ’s here all right. But I had three fives left over from last pay day, and they ’re gone.”

“Maybe they got jolted out in the bronc pen this afternoon,” Homer suggested. “You were a nut not to put ’em—”

“I did,” interrupted Curly. “I had the bills in my hip pocket till after that was all over. I didn’t put them back in my shirt till—let ’s see. Why, it was while we were talking in the wagon shed.” He paused a moment thoughtfully. “I ’ll bet I dropped ’em in the harness room,” he went on, brightening up. “I had the dickens of a time fishing out a strap from that pile of junk.”

Homer yawned. “Better chase over and look now,” he grinned. “Otherwise some unscrupulous guy like Baldy here might get there first and make love to ’em.”

He ducked to escape a swift pass from the other

cow-puncher, and Curly, picking up his hat, opened the door and started across the open space to the wagon sheds.

It was a glorious night, crisp and cold. The ranch house was dark and silent, but the moon, hanging in a cloudless sky, flooded the buildings with a soft, silvery radiance that was almost as light as day. Curly went through the wagon shed, crossed the barn and stepped into the harness room. Here it was very dark save where the single window was faintly outlined by the reflected light. But he felt his way forward to the corner and was just about to strike a match when he stopped abruptly and held his hand.

“... no use ... hunted ... a week there.”

The words, broken and unintelligible, came faintly to his ears through the broken glass. Who in the world could be in that out-of-the-way spot at such a time? he wondered; and instinctively he bent forward to listen.

“I tell you they *must* be found!”

This time the words were clear and distinct, and set every nerve in his body to tingling. For the voice was unmistakably that of Paul Graham, and it was equally evident that he spoke in a cold fury. Curly dropped his outstretched arm and stole cautiously toward the window.

“We ripped the hull inside of the place to pieces, an’ it ain’t— *What ’s that?*”

For a moment there was silence so utter that Curly could hear his own heart beating loudly and irregularly. Then came a faint movement and, craning his neck, he peered through the broken pane of glass.

Outside a strip of shadow lay along the side of the building, densely black against the silvery patch of light beyond. At first Curly could make out nothing. Then someone moved below him, and the next instant he was gazing at a man’s face which had suddenly appeared in the moonlight. It was a totally strange face, long and narrow, with keen black eyes and a scraggle of black hair showing under the brim of his flat-topped sombrero. There was a curious twist to his nose as if it had once been broken and set unskillfully, and as the man straightened up Curly realized with a clutch at his heart that he must stand at least six feet two or three in his heavy cowhide boots.

CHAPTER XVI

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS

CURLY had scarcely had a good look at him before the man stepped back into the shadow.

"I don't see nothin'," he said in a hoarse whisper.

"Of course you don't," retorted Mr. Graham impatiently. "There 's nothing to see. Every one 's in bed and asleep by this time. It 's the frost cracking, or a rat." There was a pause, and then he went on: "I 'd be willing to bet my last cent that Jerry did n't destroy those letters. He was smart enough to realize how much they 'd be worth to me. They must be there some place and you 've got to find them and find them quick."

"Do yuh s'pose the kid knows about 'em?" the other asked.

"Certainly not. Would he keep quiet five minutes if he did? That 's what I 'm afraid of. If he is n't driven off the ranch soon something is likely to turn up any time to put him wise."

"Want anythin' more done—" The man hesitated.

“I do not!” snarled Graham. “You ’ve already done a great deal more than I told you, and between you and Pedro you ’ve made a mess of the whole thing. That shooting, now—I never wanted him— But enough of that. Bring me those papers if you have to tear down every sod of the house to find them. Let the other matter alone.”

“All right; you ’re the boss,” returned the tall man rather sulkily. “I ’ll hike back to Midland an’ if the things is in that there shack I ’ll find ’em. Reckon that ’s about all, ain’t it?”

“Yes, that ’s all.” They were moving slowly away from the window. “Be careful how you go. I shall be leaving here day after tomorrow, but—” As they turned the corner of the barn the words died away and silence fell.

For a few minutes Curly crouched motionless against the window sill. He was hoping against hope that he might hear more, but presently, as the stillness remained unbroken, he relaxed his cramped limbs and stood up.

“Well, what do you know about that!” he breathed.

His mind was in a curious turmoil of satisfaction and bewilderment. There seemed no question now that Paul Graham was back of that series of unpleasant “accidents” which had occurred during the past few months. But though this was

so much gained, Curly was as far as ever from solving that perplexing problem of a motive.

That there had once been some sort of connection between the ranch owner and Jerry Harden seemed almost beyond a doubt, but of its nature the boy had gained no inkling. At least it was plain that his old companion had concealed letters or papers of some sort which Mr. Graham was moving heaven and earth to obtain. Curly wondered whether the mysterious attacks on himself could have been inspired by the belief that he knew anything of their hiding-place. It seemed hardly possible, but he could think of no other reason. And where in the world could Jerry have hidden papers? Not in the cabin, surely, for the boy knew every inch of it. The only possible place was the hole in the 'dobe wall covered with a sod where the man had sometimes kept his money, but there had been no papers there.

With a sigh Curly cautiously lit a match and bent over the pile of rubbish in the corner. The little wad of bills was in plain sight, but he thrust it into his pocket with a feeling, almost, of indifference, and started back through the barn and wagon shed. He moved carefully, but reached the open without hearing or seeing anything suspicious, and a half a minute later he noiselessly opened the bunk-house door and stepped inside.

“That you, kid?” came in a sleepy voice from Homer’s bunk. “What the deuce you been doing?”

Curly did not answer at once, but picking his way across the room he dropped down softly on the floor beside his friend.

“Anybody else awake?” he whispered.

There must have been a touch of suppressed excitement in his voice, for sleep instantly forsook Homer, and he raised himself suddenly on one elbow.

“No; what ’s up?” he asked eagerly.

Curly leaned closer until his lips almost touched the other’s ear. “I saw Graham just now back of the harness room,” he breathed. “He ’s the one, kid, who ’s been making all this trouble for me.”

The breath whistled through Homer’s teeth. “Wough! Are you sure?” he demanded.

“Certain. He wanted to drive me off the ranch; I heard him say so. That is n’t all, either. He was talking to a strange guy about some papers of his that Jerry Harden had, and they can’t find.”

“Are you plumb locoed?” Homer interrupted sharply. “What the dickens has old man Graham to do with Jerry Harden?”

“I don’t know any more than you do,” Curly answered; “but it ’s a sure thing that Jerry had some papers and hid them. They must be mighty

important, too, for the old man was pretty near crazy at not being able to find 'em."

In brief, rapid sentences he related the conversation he had overheard. Homer listened eagerly.

"If that don't beat everything!" he said when Curly paused. "The fellow with the busted nose must be the one who shot you. But where do we come in on this deal?"

"We don't, exactly, but I had some thoughts of butting into the game myself. I've sort of an idea I'd like to see just what those papers are. Maybe they'd give me a notion of what's at the bottom of Graham's underhanded work. I don't see anything to prevent getting my time from Bert to-morrow and letting it appear that I was going to try for a job with the Matadores, or some outfit over that way. Once off the Circle Bar land I can turn south and head for Midland, and maybe beat this crooked-nose chap to it."

"Do you know where the papers are hid?" Homer inquired briefly.

"No, I don't; but— Great Scott!"

He broke off abruptly, for at that moment, by some strange freak of memory, a picture had flashed into his mind out of the vanished past as clear, distinct and definite as though the events had happened a week before. He saw the sandy draw leading up from the cabin to the level plains,

shimmering in the heat of the July sun. Along the northern side the rocky walls were smooth and unbroken save at one point three hundred yards from the cabin, where a great pillar-like mass jutted out into the sand. On the shady side of this buttress he was playing—he could not have been more than six years old—playing contentedly enough with some sticks and bits of stone, until, happening to look up, he saw Jerry coming up the draw carrying a spade. Instantly he fled to a nearby thicket of mesquite and creeping into it dropped flat on the ground and lay there still as a mouse, eyes fixed on the approaching man.

Jerry came straight to the buttress and, with a cautious look around, turned the corner and began to dig close to the rock. In ten minutes he had opened a hole some three feet deep. Whereupon he took a tin tobacco box out of his pocket, dropped it into the hole and began at once to shovel the sand back over it. Having smoothed over the surface, he went back to the cabin, leaving the boy curious to know what was in the box, but entirely too afraid of Jerry to ever run the risk of finding out. For years the incident had been forgotten, and it was no wonder the boy gave a surprised exclamation when it popped suddenly into his mind.

“Well?” Homer questioned impatiently.
“What ’s the matter now?”

“I ’ve thought of it,” Curly whispered eagerly.
“I think I know where they are. Gee! I wish it was morning.”

“Well, it is,” retorted Homer with some sharpness. “And we ’ll get just about three hours’ sleep if we don’t quit this jawing and cut things short. Listen here. You ’ve planned this thing mighty slick, but where do I come in?”

“You? Why, I—I did n’t suppose you ’d want to give up a good job here just to go off on a sort of wild goose chase that might not amount to anything in the end.”

Homer sniffed. “Job be hanged! I can get another when I want one. You ’re a nice sort of a pal with a thing like this coming off, and not counting me in on it. Of course if you don’t want me to go along, that ’s another matter. Just say so, and—”

“Want you!” interrupted Curly joyfully. “Of course I do. It would be simply great for us to go down there together. I only thought—”

“Don’t,” yawned Homer. “It ’s bad for the brain. We ’ll call it settled, then. We ’ll both get our time to-morrow and start for the Mata-dores. We can think up some sort of an excuse

by breakfast time. I 'm about dead with sleep now."

He turned over and pulled the blankets about his shoulders. Curly hastened to slip out of his clothes and crawl into bed, and ten minutes later he was dead to the world.

CHAPTER XVII

HEADING SOUTH

FRAMING an excuse for leaving the outfit so abruptly was not as difficult as it might seem to the uninitiated. The typical cow-puncher is a notoriously roving creature, subject to sudden whims and freaks of fancy. He may stay contentedly on a ranch for months and then over night decide to pull up stakes and move on.

So when the two boys approached Bert after breakfast next morning with the news of their imminent departure, pleading only that they wanted a change of scene, he grumbled ferociously, and made a perfunctory attempt to argue them into staying. But all the while he was scrabbling amongst the litter of his desk for a check-book, as if he realized the futility of words.

“You ’re plumb daffy, both of you,” he grunted as he filled out one check after another and handed them over. “Just when you ’re getting settled down here and being of some use, too! But I s’pose it ain’t a mite of use arguing. You ’ll have

your way no matter what I say. Well, good luck to you, an' if you ever want to come back here I reckon I can squeeze you in somewhere."

He shook hands with a hurried sort of heartiness, and they left him. Breaking the news to Dorothy proved a different matter. She was so distressed that they were obliged to take her more or less into their confidence.

"We 're not really hiking off for good, Jack," Homer explained, as they stood outside the ranch house. "We have n't told a soul but you, because there are reasons for keeping it dark; but Curly wants to go down to that place in Midland County to—er—find out some things about the man he used to live with. After we 've made the trip we 'll probably head for the Circle Bar again, and Bert 's just said he 'll take us on whenever we show up."

"Oh!" The girl's face brightened. "That is n't so bad, is it? I thought you were going away and I 'd never see you again. You 'll be back, then, when we come down in June?"

"Sure thing. But you won't say anything about this, will you—not even to your uncle?"

"Not a word," Dorothy declared. "I 'll keep it quite to myself. Are you going to start this morning?"

"Right away. We 're all packed up now.

Why don't you let us saddle up Rags and go along a ways with us?"

She welcomed the idea with enthusiasm and half an hour later the three rode away from the ranch house, heading in a westerly direction. The two boys had packed their belongings into their beds and strapped these on a pack horse which belonged to Homer. Curly rode Red Bird, who was fresh and frisky after his long rest.

For nearly an hour they rode steadily westward, chatting, joking and laying plans for their next meeting. Dorothy gave them her Chicago address and each one promised to write at the earliest opportunity. But at length they came to the boundary of the Circle Bar and the girl pulled up with a sigh.

"I'll have to go back now," she said briefly. "Good-by." She gave them each a firm hand-clasp. "You won't forget, will you?"

"To write?" asked Curly.

"To write, but most of all to—come back." Her eyes were wistful. "I have n't many friends, and I could n't bear to lose—"

She broke off abruptly and wheeled her horse. There was another good-by, flung back rather shakily over one shoulder as she galloped off. A hundred yards or so away she paused and flung up one arm in a quick boyish gesture of farewell.

Then she dipped down into a hollow and disappeared.

Curly sighed a little and swung down from his horse. "She 's an awful good kid," he remarked, pulling out his pliers to let down the wire. "I hate to think of her being with that beast of an uncle of hers."

"Don't worry," assured Homer. "He may be the limit in other ways, but he thinks the world of her. You could tell that the night of the shooting in Vega Pasture."

He passed through the gap in the fence, and when Curly had restored the wire and joined him they rode forward together.

"What was it you thought of last night—about the papers, I mean?" Homer asked directly. "Let 's have the whole story again from the beginning. I was so sleepy I should n't wonder if I missed some of it."

Curly at once plunged into a detailed narration of his last night's experience, and ended by telling of the remembrance which had come to him of Jerry Harden and the buried tin box. Homer listened to it all with constantly increasing interest.

"That 's sure going some!" he remarked when Curly had finished. "I should n't wonder a bit if those papers were in the box. Would n't we have

old Graham on a string if we could get hold of them. What do you s'pose they 're all about?"

"Give it up—unless the old man was in the cattle-stealing business with Jerry, and the papers give him away."

Homer turned the idea over in his mind for a few minutes in silence. "Seems like you 'd have known something about it if he had been—living with Jerry the way you did," he said at length.

"It might have been before I—"

Curly stopped suddenly and looked at Homer.

"Well—what?" the latter asked curiously. "Before you—what?"

"Why, before—before I came to live with Jerry," Curly finished absently. A bewildering idea had flashed suddenly into his mind.

"Ah! And when did you first come to live with Jerry?" Homer asked eagerly. "Where 'd you live before? Who *was* Jerry, anyhow?"

The questions fairly tumbled over each other in his haste to get them out. Curly gave him an odd look.

"I always lived with him—that is, ever since I can remember," he answered slowly. "I never knew anybody else. I always thought Jerry was my uncle."

"Thought! Didn't you know? Didn't you ever ask him?"

“Oh, yes. I used to ask him, but he got so mad I pretty soon gave it up. He told me my people lived in New Orleans, and when they died he took me. That ’s all he ever said about it.”

“Do you know what I think?” Homer’s voice was tense; unconsciously he had pulled in his horse. “I ’ll bet you Graham knows a heap sight more about you than you do yourself. I ’ll bet those papers have got something about you in them. Furthermore, I don’t believe you ’re any more kin to Jerry Harden than I am.”

For a moment the two friends sat looking at one another in silence. The flush which had stained Curly’s face slowly ebbed away; his eyes were bright with eagerness. One hand clenched tightly over the bridle.

“I was thinking something of that sort myself,” he said at length in a low tone. “That would account for the interest he took in me.” His lips curved in a grim smile.

“It sure would!” Homer spoke briskly. “Say! I wonder if he could be your father?”

Curly’s eyes narrowed. “Good Lord! I hope not. Think of having a man like that for a father! I ’d a great sight rather not have any.”

“Well, the thing for us to do is to locate those papers, and then we ’ll know something. And this is n’t getting ahead very fast.”

As he spoke, Homer let out his reins and they started on at a lope. They were several miles from the ranch house now, and in another ten minutes they made a wide circuit around a jutting mass of rock, and dipped into a narrow draw. When they emerged at the other end, they were headed in the right direction, and the journey south had begun.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TIN BOX

THE week which followed was pleasant but uneventful. The boys travelled comfortably without any effort for speed, for they had decided that it would be better policy to allow Graham's henchman to arrive ahead of them and commence his operations on the hut rather than run any risk of catching them in the act of searching for the tin box. They did not fail, however, to make guarded inquiries at ranch houses and line camps where they halted for the night, for traces of the man with the broken nose. But this individual must either have taken a very roundabout route or else been wonderfully skillful in keeping out of sight, for they had come within thirty miles of Jerry Harden's ranch before they gleamed any information whatever about him.

They had stopped late one afternoon at a small outfit whose owner had once worked with Homer on the Turkey Tracks, and while they were eating supper the latter took advantage of a pause to put his careless inquiry.

“Say, Ed,” he drawled, “what was the name of that fellow who worked about a week with the Turkey Tracks while we were there—the one with the crooked nose, I mean?”

The other looked at him blankly. “Crooked nose?” he repeated with a puzzled wrinkling of his forehead. “I don’t remember anybody with a crooked nose.”

“Well, his nose must have got broke once and set crooked,” Homer explained casually. “He was a tall guy, with a thin, hatchet face and black hair. You must remember him.”

“O-h!” Ed gave a sigh of relief and picked up his knife again. “You mean Shifty Harris. He did n’t work on no ranch, though.”

“He did n’t?” Homer’s look of surprise was perfect.

“Nix; another guess comin’,” retorted Ed through a mouthful of potato. “He ’s got a shack up in the hills about sixty miles northwest of here. I never knew him to work with any outfit. I reckon the least said about him the better.”

Homer raised his eyebrows. “That so?” he asked curiously. “Why?”

“Oh, there ’s all sorts of stories floating around about him. Of course you can’t believe half you hear, but they say he used to run with Dandy Jim’s gang years ago.”

"Guess that was before my time," Homer remarked, "though I remember the name."

"It sure was." Ed tilted back his chair and gazed retrospectively at his plate. "Must have been fifteen years ago, anyway, when they broke up. I was only a kid, but I remember well how they used to run things pretty much to suit themselves. There was about a dozen of 'em, and the leader went by the name of Dandy Jim 'cause he was always such a swell dresser. Funny thing, though, nobody that I know ever got a good look at him. He always had his hat pulled down, you know, and some say he wore a mask. Their headquarters was in the hills over near the borderline—nobody knew just where. They 'd steal cattle, hold up the stages, an' do any old thing they liked an' get away with the goods."

"Gee! Folks around here must have been a fine lot of dubs," put in Homer scornfully.

"Oh, I don't know," Ed protested. "There was n't many of 'em in those days, an' the gang had 'em pretty well scared. They were all dandy shots, and did n't care much more about killing a man than I would popping a steer for beef."

"Humph!" Homer looked unconvinced. "Then he left the country, you say?"

"That 's the way the story runs. Must have been about fifteen or sixteen years ago when he

just disappeared, and nobody 's seen or heard of him since. The gang broke up after a while—could n't pick a leader, I reckon. Shifty Harris built a shack over in the hills, an' he 's been there ever since. Jerry Harden was another one, they say. He got his last fall."

Homer nodded. "I heard about that," he said briefly.

The talk drifted to something else and presently they turned in. Next morning, after bidding farewell to their host, the two boys started leisurely toward the F. M. Ranch, which had been their alleged destination, and having covered about half the distance they turned off to the east in the direction of Curly's old home.

"Well, we learned something," Homer remarked.

"It 's funny that this Shifty should have been so thick with Jerry, and I never saw him," Curly said with a puzzled frown.

"Maybe they were n't so thick when you were there," Homer suggested. "They might have had a scrap before the gang broke up. What I 'd like to know is where old Graham comes in."

"I don't suppose *he* could have been this Dandy Jim?"

Homer burst into a shout of laughter. "Him? Dandy Jim!" he snorted. "Does he look it?"

Why, Dandy Jim was tall and slim, with coal-black hair, and rode like a demon. Do you recollect old Graham on a horse? He 's got a shape like a barrel."

"Say!" Curly put in indignantly. "Where the deuce did you get all those particulars? You were about two years old and five hundred miles away when he left the country."

"Oh, I heard all about him from the F. M. boys," the other returned airily. "Everybody remembers him."

"Shucks! I don't believe it. You 've got too much imagination, kid. Besides, a man 'll change a lot in fifteen years."

"I s'pose he will," Homer conceded. "Of course, that would account for his knowing Jerry, but how about all the interest he took in you?"

Curly shook his head. "You 've got me. We want to find that box, and maybe we 'll be put wise to a lot. Now, what are we going to do if we find Shifty here ahead of us?"

"Why, I suppose we 'll have to wait till he goes away, or perhaps we can do our digging at night when he 's asleep."

"That would be better, I think," Curly said decidedly. "There 's no telling how long he 'll stay there, especially when he does n't find anything."

Homer quite agreed with him, and they decided

to first reconnoitre carefully and see just how matters stood. Though they had made an early start, it was nearly two o'clock before they reached a small draw about a mile from the canyon, where they had planned to leave their horses. Having made a hurried meal of bread and dried beef, they fastened the horses securely to some scrub oaks and proceeded on foot.

In twenty minutes they came to the mouth of the canyon and, going into it a little way, they dropped down beside some scattered boulders close to the southern side to hold a consultation. It was quite impossible to see the cabin from where they lay. It was at least a quarter of a mile away, and hidden behind an abrupt curve which started at about the point where the rocky buttress projected from the southern rim. The question was should they crawl forward to the turn, trusting to the protection of the rocks and bushes, or make their way around on the surface and so get a view of the cabin from above. After a survey of the ground they decided on the former method. They would be less likely to be seen by any one passing on the open prairie, and there was really little danger of being surprised by Harris, who would scarcely be leaving the canyon at that hour of the day.

Their progress was slow and tedious. Keep-

ing as they did close to the southern wall, they had to crawl around and over many boulders which had fallen from above, and lay in scattered confusion along the bottom, while several times long detours were necessary to avoid rifts and gullies. But in little less than an hour they reached the bend and, lying flat on the sand, peered cautiously around the buttress.

From where they lay there was a very good view of the cabin three hundred yards away, and it was at once apparent that the work of destruction had begun, and was even then being conducted with much thoroughness. The roof was quite gone and part of one side wall. Through the open door they could see a man working vigorously with a pick or bar dislodging the blocks, breaking them up and finally throwing the pieces over the wall, where a rapidly growing pile testified to his industry. Evidently Shifty Harris was following Mr. Graham's instructions to the letter.

"Gee!" Homer whispered, as they drew back behind the buttress. "He 'll be a week finishing that job."

"Yes, and then he 'll dig up the floor and most likely tear down the sheds. We 'll have a nice wait if we don't get busy till he 's gone."

"We sure will!" Homer took another look around the rock. "I don't see why we should n't

start in right away," he went on, drawing back his head. "He 's safe for another three hours, and it won't take us that long to do the trick. This is the right place, is n't it?"

Curly looked the ground over carefully and at length picked out a spot well back in the corner. "Over there, I think, close to the rock," he said. "I believe we could take a chance now. We 'll have to use our knives, I guess."

"They 're all we 've got."

Homer felt around in his pockets and presently pulled out a clasp-knife, the single blade of which was about five inches long and when open was held by a catch. Curly had a regulation hunting-knife in a sheath, and together they set to work loosening the sand. It was rather slow work, for the surface was hard and unyielding, and mixed with stones and bits of rock fallen from above. Consequently it took over an hour to scoop out a hole three feet in diameter and as many deep, without finding any trace of the mysterious box.

"Gee! That 's back-breaking," grunted Homer, straightening up and wiping his forehead with one sleeve. "I 'm glad I 'm not a farmer. Say, kid, are you sure you did n't dream about this box?"

Curly grinned sympathetically. "I certainly did n't dream it," he said, "but I could n't swear it was still here. It 's quite a while ago, and he

might have dug it up without my knowing it. Still, that doesn't seem very likely. If he had, that other crowd— Say! I struck something then."

He had been idly prodding about with his knife at the bottom of the hole close to one edge, and as he spoke the point struck something beneath the surface. Instantly they both commenced to dig furiously and for a few moments the dirt flew. Then Curly bent forward eagerly and snatched out of the hole a small rectangular object about six inches long and three square, rusty, corroded, thick with dirt and wrapped around and around with a stout piece of rawhide.

"There!" he exclaimed triumphantly, holding it up. "What do you think of your uncle now?"

"Bully for you, kid!" Homer said approvingly. "That 's the goods, all right. Open her up and see if—"

He stopped abruptly with a swift, hissing intake. His eyes, wide with surprise, were fixed aghast on something behind Curly. At the same instant a quiet, drawling voice broke the silence.

"Will yuh gentlemen kindly elevate your hands? I got you both covered."

CHAPTER XIX

THE CUP AND THE LIP

HOMER'S hands went up instantly, but Curly, stunned by surprise, hesitated an instant.

"Put your hands up, yuh fool!" grated the voice, and this time there was something in it which sent a shiver along the boy's spine and brought swift obedience.

For a moment there was silence. Then he heard a rustle behind him and felt the tin box plucked roughly from his fingers.

"It 's mighty nice o' yuh boys takin' all this trouble for me," the voice went on mockingly. "You 've sure saved me a pile o' work. I reckon you must 'a' had inside information."

Neither of the boys made any comment; words seemed superfluous.

"I 'm afraid I 'll have to trouble yuh a little more," continued the man with evident relish. "I sorter hanker after them guns I see in your scabbards. Will yuh be so kind as to slip 'em out an' lay 'em on the ground? I 'd be kinda careful, if I was you. My own six-shooters is old an'

well greased, an' they got a habit of goin' off mighty suddenlike."

Without a word Curly and Homer drew out their Colts and laid them on the ground.

"Thank you kindly," the stranger said when this was done. "There 's jest one thing more before I go. I ain't a very sociable guy, an' I like to travel alone. O' course, I don't mean to insinuate you 'd force your comp'ny on me, but I don't want to be havin' to think about it. You, there, with your back to me, jest lay down on your face an' cross your wrists behind. Good! Now, yuh other one—I ain't acquainted with your name—kindly tie his wrists good an' proper with that elegant handkerchief I see around his neck."

Homer ground his teeth and looked despairingly around. Then, with a savage glance at the man who stood there, a mocking smile on his face and a very efficient looking Colt in each hand, he did as he was told.

"Thanks. Now his feet, please, with your own. Seems too bad to use such han'some articles for that purpose, but I don't know of anythin' else so handy. Little tighter. They ain't bein' put on for ornament, yuh know. That 's better. Now, my scowlin' friend, I must ask yuh to lay yourself down same as him. I don't want to show

no favoritism. You don't want to? No, I s'pose not—but yuh got to!"

A steely glitter came into the jeering eyes for a moment, and Homer flopped down on the sand almost foaming with helpless rage and humiliation. An instant later he felt a piece of rawhide on his wrists. It was twisted dexterously a couple of times and then tied with a force which brought tears into his eyes. His ankles were similarly treated, and then his captor stood up.

"Well, by-by," he remarked, as he picked up their guns. "Sorry to leave yuh, but time is fleeting. Yuh c'n yell all yuh like after I 'm gone, but don't begin too soon, 'cause if I should happen to hear yuh, I 'll come back an' make food for buzzards out o' you both as sure as shootin'."

They heard his feet crunch the sand; then he stubbed his toe against a rock and swore softly. Finally silence fell. Silence, that is, for about three minutes when Homer, unable longer to contain himself, rolled around on one side and loosened a flood of invective, vivid, picturesque, but not wholly printable. Curly, struggling into a sitting posture, listened to his remarks with an appreciative interest. Occasionally he supplied a word when Homer was at a loss—which was not often—and he seemed to be in perfect harmony

with his friend's state of mind. At length the latter paused for breath.

"Well, kid, you 've sure got the gift of expressin' yourself," Curly drawled. "It 's kind of saved me a lot of trouble. I was just about bursting before you began, but now I feel pretty well eased up."

"I don't see anything funny about it," snapped Homer angrily, straining at the rawhide on his wrists. "If I could only get the drop on that skunk, I 'd settle his hash."

"Sure thing," agreed Curly. "But that don't help us a whole lot. Besides, you ought to be throwing a few bouquets our way. If there ever was a couple of greenhorns so blame foolish as to work here without keeping watch, I never heard of 'em."

"Don't you suppose I know that? It 's what makes me madder than anything else." Homer twisted about in a futile effort to release his arms. "And this darn rawhide is so tight it 's something fierce."

"Roll over here and see if I can't get hold of it with my teeth," Curly suggested.

"I reckon I 'd better loosen you up first," said Homer. "It 'll be easier to untie that handkerchief, especially since I did n't pull it any tighter than I could help."

This proved to be the case, for in less than ten minutes he succeeded in loosening the knot with his teeth. Curly at once freed his own feet and, picking up his knife, hastily slit the bonds which bound his companion. The latter sprang up, swung his arms vigorously a few times to restore the circulation, and stepped forward to join Curly, who was already making a keen survey of the canyon.

“He ’s left by the upper way,” the latter observed, as he took in every corner in sight. “His horse is gone from the corral. I reckon we ’d better make tracks back to the draw and get ours.”

“That ’s what,” agreed Homer. “And then we ’ll scrape up some shooting irons. I never thought,” he burst out, as if the memory of it still rankled, “that I ’d be buncoed out of my six-gun by a squint-eyed, twisted-nose, son-of-a-gun like that. I ’d like to kick myself from here to New Orleans.”

“It *was* Shifty, then?” Curly asked as they hurried along. “You know, I did n’t see him.”

“It sure was! And if I ever meet up with him again, he ’ll be shiftier yet.”

“Well, why should n’t we?” Curly’s eyes hardened and his chin squared. “As soon as we get our horses and a couple of six-shooters we can

light out after him, and I reckon we 'll catch up with him some place."

Homer looked dubious. "I sure hope we do, but he 'll have the deuce of a long start."

"Of course; but don't you believe he 'll make for that shack of his in the hills? It is n't likely he 'll make straight for the Circle Bar without stopping there, especially when it 's right on his way."

"That 's right; of course he will!" Homer exclaimed enthusiastically. "Having got the papers so quick, he is n't likely to break his neck getting 'em back to Graham."

They found the horses in good shape and, mounting hurriedly, started at a gallop toward Ed Winton's place, where they hoped to be able to borrow something or other in the way of weapons. Just how to account for the loss of their own puzzled them not a little and formed the main subject of conversation during the three-hour ride. They had not, in fact, come to any definite decision when they rode up to the ranch house toward dusk, but fortunately this did not prove necessary. They found Ed much flustered by a court summons he had just received in connection with a damage suit, on the point of starting for the county seat forty miles away in order to be there on time in the morning. He had no time to ask questions,

but merely told them to make themselves at home and take anything they wanted. The two boys took him at his word and, having possessed themselves of his spare Colt and a Winchester, they had supper and turned in at once.

CHAPTER XX

TRAPPED

IT was pitch dark when they arose at three o'clock. Even after their hurried breakfast of warmed-over coffee and bacon, it was still so dark that they could scarcely see a horse's length in front of them. However, they saddled up and started slowly toward the northwest, and presently the impenetrable blackness began to give way to the gold gray of dawn.

Slowly, gradually, the inky pall lifted, the horizon widened, until at length the whole vast, flat expanse rolled out before them, stripped of the glamor given it by the play of sunlight and shadow, a grim, lifeless, forbidding waste. Somewhere amongst the rocks a coyote howled his long-drawn, quavering protest against the desolation of it all. Once, high overhead, they saw a buzzard floating, a motionless black patch against the cold gray sky.

The friends shivered and urged their horses faster, and by the time the sun rose, they had put twelve or fifteen miles between them and the ranch house.

The hut they were in search of was still a good way off—at least fifty miles, if they could believe

the testimony of one of Ed's cow-punchers; and they would need every bit of their early start to reach it before nightfall. They were not anxious to get there much before dusk, lest their surprise should fail. On the other hand unless they came within sight of it while there was still light, they might miss it altogether. So they pushed on as rapidly as they could without utterly exhausting the horses, and about three in the afternoon began to encounter the scattered rocks and boulders, the rifts and gullies, and canyons which marked the beginning of the breaks.

This was distinctly encouraging, and as they rode into the first canyon, they wondered whether their informant could have been right in placing the shack so far away. They had scarcely emerged from the narrow, closed-in walls, before the sun, which up to now had been shining brightly out of a cloudless sky, began to grow curiously dull and lifeless as though a smoky veil was being drawn across it. Interested as they were in their discussion, they failed to notice this for some minutes. Then the unnatural saffron tint of everything about forced it on their attention. Abruptly they ceased talking and glanced quickly upward.

“Whew!” exclaimed Homer tersely.
“Norther!”

Without further words they hastened to unstrap

slickers from behind the saddles, shook them out and quickly slipped them on, at every moment casting anxious glances at the sky. Already the curious haze was passing, giving place to great masses of dark clouds that rushed up from the horizon at an incredible speed, expanding and spreading out on every side as they advanced. There was a stillness in the air, ominous and unnatural, as though the earth had ceased for a moment to breathe and was waiting expectantly for the catastrophe.

"I wonder if we 'd be any better off back in the canyon?" Homer questioned, as he pulled his hat down over his eyes.

"I don't believe so. I did n't see much of any shelter there. Gee! Here she comes."

A murmur like the humming of a gigantic top came faintly to them over the prairie beyond the breaks and, twisting in their saddles, they looked northward. Far away across the level surface a wavering sheet of sand was sweeping toward them as swiftly as a bird can fly. The rolling, tumbling, low-hanging clouds rushed madly on, faster and faster as though trying to escape the very wind itself. The murmur grew louder; merged into a sound like the breaking of surf upon a rocky shore. And then, with a deafening roar, the storm caught them.

An instant before Curly had taken a deep gulp of air, and then held his breath, and it was as well he did. Otherwise he would have stood a good chance of being smothered by the sand which enveloped him in an impenetrable cloud. It filled his hair, poured down his neck, found its way into every tiny opening in his clothes. And the biting, stinging particles, driven by irresistible force, were harder to stand against than snow or hail or rain, or anything of the sort he had ever known. Frantic with pain, Red Bird became instantly unmanageable and, taking the bit in his teeth, bolted. All Curly could do was to try and guide him so that he would not run headlong into anything, but even this was difficult when he could see scarcely a dozen feet ahead.

In perhaps ten minutes there was a slight let-up, due to the passing of the first great volume of sand. But it was very slight, and the storm continued with uninterrupted violence for what seemed to the boy an eternity, but which was, in fact, little less than an hour. Then it began gradually to subside. The wind decreased, the biting showers of sand slowly lessened and finally ceased altogether, and Curly managed to pull Red Bird down to a walk.

Homer was nowhere in sight, but Curly had rather expected that. As he pulled off his hat and

shook out the sand, he looked about in every direction, hoping to see his friend issue from some canyon or rocky shelter. But nothing of the sort happened, and as the minutes passed the boy began to grow impatient. He was on the point of starting back to institute a search, when, out of the tail of his eye, he caught sight of a horseman disappearing into a canyon considerably more than a mile ahead.

“Humph!” he grunted, spurring forward. “He might have given me a yell. I s’pose he thinks that ’s funny.”

As he rode along, making what speed he could over the rough ground, Curly realized that the character of the scenery had changed greatly. Everywhere rocks were piled up in confusion, clothed with scraggly trees and undergrowth, and sliced by ravines and canyons without number. It looked very much like the breaks which bordered the Canadian river just across from the Circle Bar, and he wondered how far the storm had carried them out of their way.

When he entered the canyon where he had glimpsed Homer, the latter was nowhere to be seen though his trail showed quite plainly in the shifting sand. Curly fumed inwardly as he followed it. It was certainly a silly sort of business, this playing hide and seek, and he wished Homer would

come alive and stop his nonsense. The trail led straight through the canyon and up to the level again. Then it swerved sharply to the left and wound in and out amongst the rocks in a bewildering fashion. All at once, as Curly had about made up his mind to punch Homer's head the minute he caught up with him, it suddenly emerged upon a small open space a couple of hundred feet across, quite hemmed in by rocks.

To one side, barely forty feet away, was a rough wooden shack, a tiny spiral of smoke curling from a chimney at the farther end. The door was closed, and standing in front of it, head down and bridle reins trailing, was a horse at the sight of which Curly gave a start and pulled in Red Bird abruptly. For though the roan was of much the same height and general appearance as Homer's mount, Curly instantly realised that it was not his at all.

"Thunder!" he muttered, wheeling swiftly. "I 'd better get out of here and do it quick."

"What 's your hurry, son? Better stop a while and rest up?"

A tall, powerfully built man with a Winchester tucked under one arm, had risen silently from among the rocks at his right and stood regarding him quizzically. Before Curly could reply, another figure appeared with equal celerity on

the other side, and a familiar voice drawled jeeringly:

“Y-as, stay awhile, Meester Curly, an’ see your fren’s.”

Turning, with a quick tightening of his throat, the boy saw Pedro standing there, a Colt in one hand and his ugly face wreathed in a smile of malicious satisfaction.

CHAPTER XXI

THE HAND OF A CHILD

FOR a second or two the boy looked steadily at the Mexican without speaking. Then he turned back to the other man, his heart beating rapidly but his lips curved in a slight smile.

“You ’re sure very pressing,” he said, resting one hand on the horn of his saddle. “I reckon I ’ll have to accept your invitation.”

The big man stepped down from the rocks and stood beside him. “Good,” he grunted. “S’pose you hop off, an’ I ’ll look after your cayuse.”

Curly swung himself to the ground and the other, reaching forward, dexterously plucked his six-shooter—Ed Winton’s, to be more exact—out of the holster and thrust it into his own belt.

“From a child I was always terrible scared o’ firearms,” he remarked with a perfectly serious face as he took the bridle reins. “Some people are so darned careless with ’em.”

“They do have a way of going off unexpectedly,” Curly agreed. “Want me to go into the house?”

The man grinned. "Sure. There's a friend o' yours in there. Take him in to see Shifty, Pedro."

The Mexican smiled unpleasantly as he stepped forward. "Verra like old times to see yo' again," he jeered. "'Member Jones Camp?"

Curly wheeled fiercely on him. "Shut up, you dirty greaser!" he flared, his jaw set. "Don't talk to me or I'll smash your thick skull."

The big fellow laughed, and Pedro turned livid and made a threatening motion with his gun. But at that moment the door opened and Shifty Harris stood on the threshold.

"Well, well!" he drawled blandly. "To think of yuh lookin' me up so soon! I sure do feel flattered. It's a great thing to be popular with folks. Step right in an' make yourself to home."

Though writhing inwardly at his helplessness, Curly managed to keep up a good front as he entered the cabin and sat down on a nail-keg. "Nice place you've got here," he commented, as he glanced about the room.

Shifty stood beside the table eyeing him quiz-zically. "It ain't bad," he agreed. "Comfortable, roomy, *an'* retired; so retired, yuh might say nobody, hardly, ever comes to see me so I'm jest nachurally anxious to keep yuh here a good long time."

As the boy sat there, his fingers loosely linked about his crossed knee, an idea suddenly came to him and he leaned forward impulsively.

“What ’s the game, anyhow, Shifty?” he asked earnestly. “What ’s it all about? What do you want to keep me for? Can’t you tell a fellow? I ’m just about eaten up with curiosity.”

There was the briefest possible pause as the man looked at him seriously, an odd sort of speculation in his glance. It was as if he were swiftly turning over something in his mind, weighing pros and cons, debating inwardly, perhaps, as to whether another allegiance might pay him better than his pact with Graham. But almost instantly the mood had passed. His eyes gleamed mockingly again, and he shook his head.

“Nothing doing, kid,” he observed lightly. “I jest want yuh around because I ’m so darn stuck on your company. An’ you ’re such a slippery cuss I reckon I ’ll have to make dead sure of you this time.”

He stepped over to the wall and took down a rope which hung there. Then he let out a yell for “Bill,” and in a moment or two the tall man responded. As Curly watched these preparations, a wave of despair came over him, but he made no protest. It would be an entirely useless waste of time, he knew, so he submitted quietly, and in a

few minutes his hands and feet were tied securely and he was thrust into a bunk which stood to one side of the fireplace.

"There!" Shifty remarked in a satisfied tone. "I guess you won't slip out of that in a hurry. Yuh might as well get used to it first as last, 'cause it 'll be some time before—"

He paused abruptly and bit his lip. Then, without further comment he stepped over to the far corner of the room and, taking something from a shelf, stuffed it into his pocket. Curly saw that it was the tin box. He also noticed that the raw-hide was still about it and that apparently it had not been opened. Having secured the box, Shifty drew his companion to one side and for some minutes they conversed in whispers. Then they went outside, closing the door behind them.

Left alone, Curly began at once to test the rope by pulling and twisting his wrists, but a very few minutes of this convinced him that if he had to depend solely on his own efforts he would stay there forever. Abandoning the effort, he lay back and his gaze wandered speculatively around the room. A rough stone fireplace filled one end. There were a few rough chairs and a long table. About the walls, hanging from wooden pegs, was an extraordinary variety of bridles, spurs, hats

and garments of all sorts; the floor was covered with a dirty litter of odds and ends.

At length the boy's glance fell upon a narrow closed door in the opposite wall and he wondered where it led to. Probably a lean-to, he decided, which he had not seen from the outside. And then he must have dozed off, for he remembered nothing more until something startled him into complete wakefulness and he found himself gazing intently across the room trying to place the sound which had aroused him.

Presently it came again, a slight creaking, and he saw the door opposite move a little. Fascinated, he watched it open little by little barely an inch at a time. At length a small, towsled head was thrust through the narrow opening and a pair of black, beady eyes darted swift, suspicious glances about the room. In the course of time they lighted upon Curly and stayed there, growing larger and blacker and rounder until it seemed as if they must soon pop out with surprise.

Finally, after ten minutes of this silent scrutiny, a figure slipped into the room, and Curly saw that it was a very small boy, with long black hair matted and tangled, and face and hands incredibly grimy. He was dressed with extreme simplicity in a cotton shirt and a pair of man's trowsers

which had been cut away above the knee and which seemed fairly to swallow him up, so full were they in the seat and so large were the legs, from beneath which peeped the child's small bare toes.

For a few moments he stood motionless, his back against the door, surveying Curly silently. And as he looked the expression of intense surprise slowly changed to something quite different and infinitely less pleasant. The small lips narrowed uncannily; the round black eyes took on a look of mingled cunning and ferocity that was ghastly in a child who could not possibly have been more than five years old. And as he began an exaggerated stealthy approach across the room, Curly noticed for the first time that, stuck into a rope tied about his waist was the stock and a piece of the frame of an antiquated Colt, and also the hilt with about three inches of the blade of a hunting knife.

The child came slowly, throwing now and then a fearsome glance at the outer door, and when he reached the side of the bunk he stood staring at Curly for a few moments. Then, without warning, he struck the boy a sharp blow with his small fist and leaped back, ready to fly should the other make any move. Presently, reassured, he re-

turned to the bunk and a moment later poked a tentative finger at one of Curly's eyes.

"Get out! Stop that!" the latter exclaimed fiercely, as he writhed helplessly. "I 'll—I 'll bite your finger off if you do that again."

The child flew across the room but was back in a moment, and this time he held the broken knife in one hand. Desperate, Curly was about to shout for help, when an idea suddenly came to him.

"You can't cut anything with that," he said tauntingly.

The child's eyes flashed. "Can so," he retorted fiercely.

"I 'll bet you can't. It 's too darn dull."

"Show you." The small boy made a sudden pass at Curly's face and the latter shrank back into the bunk.

"Oh, I don't mean that. Of course you can cut me. You could do that with a piece of tin. But you can't cut a piece of rope."

For a moment the child eyed him silently. Then his glance wandered to the other side of the room where the coil of rope had hung. Curly watched him keenly, his heart beating rapidly. There was hope at last, if he could only work it right. With an effort he pulled himself together.

"I 'll bet you can't cut *this* rope," he said

quietly, as he rolled over with his face to the wall and his bound hands turned outward toward the child.

In the silence which followed he could hear his heart thudding loudly and unevenly, and every nerve quivered under the strain of waiting. The little fiend might do anything. He was quite as likely to hack at his wrists as to cut the rope, and Curly knew well enough what a severed artery would mean. And all the time he was listening eagerly, feverishly, for the sound of footsteps outside. The perspiration gathered in little beads on his forehead, and when something suddenly touched his wrists, he had to grit his teeth to keep from crying out. But it was only the child's fingers fumbling about where the rope was knotted, and presently his voice cut sharply through the silence.

"Show you," he said in a shrill, childish treble, with that odd touch of fierceness in it. And the next instant he began to saw at the rope with the broken knife-blade.

Though the edge was dulled and the hand which guided it weak and uncertain, Curly felt the strands slowly part one by one as they were sawed through. So frantic with impatience was he that, heedless of the pain, he helped matters a little by forcing his wrists apart with all the strength he

could summon. Bit by bit the hemp gave as the knife cut through it; and then, all at once, the thing he had dreaded came.

A step sounded without, the latch clicked, and quite suddenly Curly's self-control snapped like a rope when the strain becomes too great. With a tremendous effort he tore his hands loose, turned with a single bound and snatched the knife from the child's fingers. The next instant the cords on his ankles were severed, and he stumbled to his feet, swayed a moment, and with swift, uncertain steps, reached the door, snatching from the wall as he passed a heavy, loaded quirt which hung there.

CHAPTER XXII

AN OLD SCORE

FORTUNATELY for Curly there had been a momentary interruption outside: nothing else could have saved him. The man who had started to enter was evidently standing, his hand on the latch, while he talked with some one else, for the murmur of their voices came indistinctly through the warped boards. Curly sent a searching glance back into the room, but the child had vanished swiftly and silently as a wild thing. Then the latch clicked again, and as the door slowly opened, the boy took a fresh grip on his quirt and crouched for a spring.

“Yes, saddle up the black as quick as you can.” It was Shifty’s voice. “I got to be off right away.”

There was a mumbled answer, the door swung open briskly, and Harris stepped in, closing it behind him. A look of intense surprise flashed into his eyes, his mouth half opened as if to give a shout of warning, but that was all. Before he could even raise a hand, the weighted end of the

quirt struck him squarely between the eyes and without a sound he collapsed in a limp heap on the floor.

Like a flash Curly pounced on him, for there was not a minute to lose. Snatching the six-shooter from his belt, he tore the tin box out of the unconscious man's pocket and transferred it to his own. Then he caught up his hat from where it lay in a corner, and opening the door, looked out.

There was no one in sight. He walked to the corner of the cabin and peered around it. Still no one; but directly behind the shack stood a long, low ramshackle shed and through the open door came clearly the lilt of a sentimental Spanish song Pedro had been wont to croon back at the ranch. Curly's jawed squared with a sudden, grim satisfaction as he moved softly toward it. Inside, the place was larger than one would have supposed. A dozen rough stalls, many of them with occupants ranged along one side, leaving a space some six feet wide at the other. In this open passage, quite close to the door, stood a horse, coal black save for a triangular splotch of white on his forehead, and bending over buckling the cinch was Pedro. There was no one else in sight, and Curly's smile grew grimmer as he moved softly forward to cover the unconscious Mexican, who was just beginning another verse of his song.

*“Del cielo la estrella Brillante,
El viento que viene del mar,
Sabiendo tu perfidia te adora,
Porque lo llam-m-m——”*

The words died in a stammering, choking gurgle as he stood up. His face was ashen and his eyes full of a sudden terror.

“Well, Pedro, you look kind of sick,” observed Curly maliciously. “Are n’t you glad to see me?”

The Mexican’s lips moved spasmodically, but no sound came. Curly’s face grew suddenly serious as he remembered that there was no time for fooling.

“Where ’s Bill?” he asked curtly.

“He—he gone,” stammered the Mexican.

“Good. Now listen here. Take that saddle off and put mine on, and do it quick—*quick*, you understand. If you can’t get some speed up, I ’ll—”

He finished with a threatening movement of his Colt. The Mexican’s knees trembled.

“Doan shoot!” he gasped. “Doan shoot! I—I do it.”

With frantic haste he tore the saddle off the black and flung it to the floor. Then he made a dart for a row of saddles hanging on pegs and fumbled among them. Three or four came down with a crash, but, unheeding, he clutched the right one and running back with it threw it on the horse.

In a thrice the cinch was buckled, and he stood up, eying Curly fearsomely.

“Come over here,” the latter commanded. And as the Mexican approached in fear and trembling, the boy plucked the Colt out of his holster and then motioned him back against the wall.

“That ’s about all, I reckon,” said Curly, taking the bridle reins. “No, wait a minute.” He turned back. “Take out your knife. Good. Now cut the cinch and stirrup leathers on that saddle—cut ’em off altogether.” Pedro obeyed without question. “Now cut ’em off all those other ones.”

The frightened man promptly did as he was told, and Curly watched the mutilation with considerable satisfaction. It was the best he could do to hinder pursuit. When it was all over, he led the black out of the shed, and as he did so Red Bird, tied in a stall at the farther end, lifted his head and whinnied inquiringly. Curly paused hesitatingly and glanced back.

“It ’s a shame I can’t ride you, old fellow,” he said regretfully. “But you ’re plumb done up, and could n’t carry me ten miles. I sure do hate to leave you. Hanged if I will, either!” He looked at Pedro. “Turn that horse loose,” he ordered tersely.

The moment the halter was untied, Red Bird

backed hurriedly out of the stall and, trotting to the door, squeezed through it.

“Came pretty near getting left, did n’t you, old boy,” Curly said, as the horse poked his nose into the boy’s hand. “You ’ve got to travel lively to come with me, you know.” Then he looked back at Pedro. “I ’m going to shut this door,” he remarked, “and if you open it inside half an hour, I ’ll certainly make a human colander out of you. Get me?”

With which parting threat he pushed the door shut, sprang into the saddle and rode rapidly around the cabin, with Red Bird at his heels. A moment later he was on the narrow trail which zigzagged in and out among the rocks to the canyon below.

His one desire was to get away from the spot as quickly as he could, and mingled with it was a growing anxiety as to what had become of Homer. It seemed impossible that he could have been lost for all this time, unless, of course, he had discovered whither the trail led and purposely kept away from the cabin. In that case he would probably be hiding somewhere close at hand, and as the horse made his way slowly down the rough track, Curly kept a sharp lookout on all sides for his friend.

The sun had dropped behind the rocks and al-

ready dusky shadows were gathering in the lower levels of the canyon. In a short time the darkness would be upon him, and Curly did his best to urge the black to greater speed, but to no purpose. With a maddening composure which nothing served to shake, the animal continued to pick his way leisurely down the rock-strewn slope until he had traversed about two-thirds of the distance. Then, without warning, a bullet suddenly spat against a boulder beside Curly, the sound of a shot rang in his ears, and twisting in his saddle, the boy saw, standing high up on the rocks behind him the figure of a man with a rifle, silhouetted against the clear, pale, golden blue of the western sky.

He must have stood seven or eight hundred feet away, and every ordinary trace of identity was lost, yet something in his pose reminded the boy of Pedro. When a second shot came, and the bullet raised a tiny puff of dust in the trail ahead, he remembered the Mexican's lack of proficiency with a gun and breathed a sigh of relief. It was most annoying not to be able to return the fire, but his Colt was useless at such a distance, and the only thing to do was to get out of range as quickly as possible.

He had just made the last turn which showed the way clear before him, and was looking back instinctively at the Mexican, when a shot sounded

so close, so unexpected, that he nearly tumbled out of his saddle with the shock. The man above stood rigid for a single, brief moment. Then, with a convulsive movement he flung the rifle from him and clutched at his right shoulder. An instant later he staggered back and disappeared.

“Well, he ’s winged, I guess,” drawled a voice.

Curly turned quickly and found himself face to face with Homer, who stood at the bottom of the canyon with Ed Winton’s borrowed rifle under one arm.

“Gee! You certainly gave me a shock,” he said, urging his horse forward. “Where ’ve you been all this time?”

Homer’s face assumed an expression of hurt surprise. “Where ’ve I been?” he repeated tartly. “That ’s a nice question to ask, when I ’ve spent the afternoon crawling around these rocks, tearing my clothes to bits and wearing my mind to shreds trying to find out if you ’d been fool enough to ride right up to this Harris’s front door as if you were making a social call. Seems to me I ought to be asking where *you ’ve* been.”

Curly laughed. “I was an awful fool,” he acknowledged. “I thought I was following you, and I walked right into them. But where ’s your horse? We ought to be hitting the high places.”

“Back here a ways.” They were walking down

the canyon. "You seem to have lit on your feet. Does that black belong to Shifty?"

"It was in his stable. Goodness knows who it really belongs to. I've got the tin box, too." Curly could not quite keep the triumph out of his voice.

"You have!" Homer's eyes and mouth opened simultaneously. "Wough! You're all to the good, kid! Guess I won't send in that bill for lacerated clothes, after all. Let's open it now. I want to see what's in it before it disappears again."

"We have n't got time. That bunch is likely to be after us any minute."

Without a word Homer sprinted ahead about fifty feet, dived into an opening to the right, and emerged a moment later on his horse.

"Why the deuce did n't you say so before?" he demanded, as they galloped down the canyon. "I thought you'd fixed 'em all. You're not such pumpkins as I thought. Who were they? How'd you get away? Tell us about it."

"Well, there was Shifty," Curly began, "a tall fellow named Bill, and Pedro—"

"Pedro!" interrupted Homer viciously. "That son-of-a-gun? I'd like to have got my hands on him."

"You did. He was the one you shot."

Homer looked incredulous. "Honest? Was it—*honest?*?" he demanded. "Well, that was very clever of little Johnny—though I wish that slug had hit somewhere else than his shoulder. Still, it was better than nothing. But don't let me interrupt."

Curly proceeded with the story and told it with all the detail which Homer's frequent questions demanded. The latter was much taken with the small boy.

"I would n't mind owning a kid like that," he observed admiringly. "He 's sure got spunk."

"You can have him. Of course he did me a mighty good turn, but he likewise gave me about the most unpleasant five minutes I 've ever put in."

"Where do you s'pose he came from?"

"I suppose there was an addition at the back of the cabin I did n't see. Very likely Shifty or one of the men has a Mexican wife. The kid looked as if he had Mexican blood, though it might have been mostly dirt. Say, boy, we 'll break our necks if we keep on much longer."

It was almost pitch dark and for the last twenty minutes they had been riding at a snail's pace with both horses constantly stumbling over loose rolling stones or larger boulders.

"The moon ought to be up in a couple of hours,"

Homer observed, as they pulled up to consider the situation. "It 's not much of a one, but it will give us enough light to see our way out of these rocks."

Curly slipped off his horse and stretched himself. "I reckon we can stop that long, but those fellows are likely to get busy as soon as Shifty comes alive. Of course they can't travel any better in the dark than we can, and we 've got a fair start. I 'd like to know what became of that chap Bill." He felt around for something to tie the reins to. "He 's worried me considerable."

"Maybe he was sent off some place," Homer suggested. "Why can't we light a fire and read those papers? You have n't lost 'em, I hope."

Curly gave his pocket a reassuring slap. "No, sir! They 're safe, all right. I reckon we 'll have to wait till daylight, though, to see what 's in them. It would n't be safe to light a fire so near the trail. Well, old boy, did you think it was about time somebody took notice of you?" He stroked Red Bird's nose as it was thrust into his hand. "What do you think of a horse, kid, that 'll follow you around like a dog?"

"He 's all right, is n't he? I wish mine had half the sense. That sand storm had him plumb locoed, and he took me so far off the trail that I was clean lost. That 's why I did n't catch up to you."

Curly grinned sheepishly. "I sure played the idiot following the first horse I saw. I s'pose it was lucky, though, the way things turned out. Otherwise we might not have got— *Listen!*"

He broke off abruptly, and in the tense silence which followed he could hear his heart beat. Then suddenly from out the darkness there came faintly the jingle of a spur, the soft thud of horses' hoofs on the thick sand, the click as one of them struck a rock. He felt Homer clutch his arm.

"They 're coming up the trail!" breathed the latter in a strained whisper. "Gag your horse, quick!"

Curly was standing beside the black, and Red Bird still nosed about his pocket where he sometimes found sugar. As the realization of their danger came to him, the boy reached out blindly, and more by good luck than management touched the black's head, slid his fingers down and gripped his nostrils. At the same time he caught Red Bird's nozzle with his left hand, and waited.

The tramping came nearer; there must have been three or four horses from the noise. There was a murmur of voices, and the boy caught a pungent whiff of tobacco wafted to him by the light breeze. And then, quite suddenly, out of the darkness, there came the shrill nickering of a horse who knows that one of his kind is not far away.

CHAPTER XXIII

PAUL GRAHAM'S SECRET

BOTH horses tried at once to throw up their heads and answer the call. Curly had a good grip on the black, but to his dismay he felt Red Bird's nose slipping little by little through his fingers. Desperate, he breathed a fierce command to the horse to stand still, and strangely enough the animal obeyed him. The strangers passed within twenty feet without a pause, and the danger was over. Neither of the boys spoke, however, for a good five minutes, when Homer broke the silence.

"Whew!" he murmured, brushing his hand across his face. "That was some close."

Curly let go the horses and leaned back against a boulder. "You 've said it," he agreed. "Holding these cayuses was some job. If they 'd pulled an inch further apart I 'd have been pretty nearly torn in half. I was n't cut out for an acrobat, that 's sure."

"Well, we came out of it all right," commented

Homer. "Those fellows are headed for Shifty's place, I reckon."

"I expect it's Bill and some of his friends. We'd better get a move on, moon or no moon." Curly was loosening the reins as he spoke.

Homer quite agreed with him, and, mounting, they started on as best they could. About nine o'clock the moon rose and made travelling easier. but they were still at sea regarding their whereabouts. They figured, however, that the storm must have diverted them to the south, so that if they rode due east they would either strike their back trail or some familiar landmark. But it was long past daybreak when they found themselves on the northern border of Ed Winton's ranch.

At seven they reached the ranch house, utterly done up from weariness and lack of sleep. Ed had not yet returned, so there were no questions to be answered. They hurriedly turned the horses into a corral, got something to eat and then tumbled into bed. When Curly opened his eyes it seemed as if he could not have slept more than an hour or two, but a glance at his watch told him that it was almost five o'clock. Homer still slumbered heavily beside him, and reaching over he gave the boy a shake.

"Wake up, kid," he called. "It's 'most five."

Homer turned over with a groan. "Get out," he mumbled. "Leave me alone."

Curly shook him again. "Come on; get up," he said. "I 'm going to open the box."

When this had penetrated to the other's brain, he sat up sleepily, and presently they were dressed and sitting at a table, the tin box in front of them. Without delay, Curly slit the rawhide with his knife and pried up the cover, which had been so rusted into place that it was almost as if it had been soldered on. Inside was a slender, oblong packet carefully wrapped in a piece of oiled silk, and when this was unrolled three letters dropped out. With fingers that shook a little, Curly unfolded the top one and spread it out on the table in front of them. For a few minutes their heads bent over it in silence; then Curly looked blankly at his companion.

"I don't understand it," he said slowly. "What 's it all mean?"

"I does sound kind of involved," returned Homer. "Suppose you read it out loud. Maybe we 'd get the sense better."

Curly picked up the sheet, hesitated an instant and then began to read in a low voice.

Galveston, July 22nd, 189—

Dear Jerry:

Things are going fine here, better than I expected. Thanks

to the letters, etc., and more than that, to the information I got out of P. G. before he passed in his checks, there has been no hitch whatever in the identification. I've even seen a friend of my boyhood days, a banker, who recognized me, though he says I've changed considerably since he last saw me years ago. Funny, isn't it? It's lucky I met him, for he's going to put up the bond, and at the moment I don't recall anyone else I could call on to do it. From all I can find out this will be the best deal we ever got together on. Of course there's great excitement about the disappearance of the kid, but since it happened so long before I appeared on the scene, no one thinks of connecting me with it. Besides, I have played the heart-broken uncle to perfection and am very active in trying to run down the kidnappers, offering large rewards, etc. So you'd better lie mighty low for a good time. I'd like to have managed the girl, too, but that couldn't be done. Anyhow, a girl is always easier to handle than a boy. They never know anything about business and always believe what you tell them.

Be careful, now, and don't let some fool stumble onto anything. I shall keep offering the rewards for some months, and by that time the thing will have blown over. If the place you're in isn't perfectly safe, better go over to Mexico for a while. I'll keep you posted as matters develop. Am sending this by Shifty.

Yours,

JIM.

Curly moistened his lips. "Jim!" he repeated huskily. "It can't be—"

"Of course it *is*!" exclaimed Homer excitedly. "Dandy Jim! You were right, after all. If old Graham wrote that letter he must be Dandy Jim."

"And the kid? Do you s'pose that kid—is me?"

"Sure! You must be. Isn't the letter to

Jerry, and didn't Jerry have the kid he talks about? And didn't you live with Jerry as long as you can remember anything? You must be the same one."

Homer made his points emphatically, but with a fine disregard for grammar. Curly did not speak for a moment. His face was drawn and a little white; his eyes were troubled.

"If that 's so," he said slowly, "who am I, anyhow?"

"You've got me. Read the other letters. Maybe there'll be something more in them about it."

Curly unfolded the next sheet which was much shorter than the first

Galveston, Sept. 3rd.

Dear Jerry:

Yours received, and glad to note everything all right. The matter here is going to be more difficult than I thought. The property pans out all right—three hundred thousand in stocks and bonds, real estate here and in Chicago, and a ranch in the Panhandle. But it's tied up in such a way that I shan't be able to realize on it for a good long time. I begin to wonder whether we were wise, after all, to pinch the kid. It complicates things a lot. I shall have to continue as P.G. indefinitely—don't forget that in writing, and don't write at all unless it's very important. I don't want to run any risk. Be careful. The rewards are still out.

Yours,

JIM.

Destroy this letter when you have read it; also all others from me.

“Humph!” grunted Homer. “That does n’t tell an awful lot. Let ’s have the other one.”

Curly took up the last sheet. “This is from Chicago, two years later,” he commented.

Dear Jerry:

Don’t be a fool. You can’t come here; it would ruin everything. Can’t you see that in order to make as much as possible out of this, I’ll have to keep on as I am? The ranch is just beginning to pay good dividends, and I am doing well in other directions. Your letter sounds as though you were afraid I was going back on you, but I’ve never done that yet to a pal, and I don’t propose to begin now. I shall be down there in a couple of months and will bring some money with me. Don’t write again; it is n’t safe. I hope that boy is n’t going to make trouble for us later. Don’t forget what I told you about burning my letters. It’s too dangerous to keep them.

Yours,

JIM.

Curly let the sheet fall to the table and sat silent, his eyes fixed thoughtfully on the floor. Homer’s brows were wrinkled painfully, and it was evident that he, too, was wrestling with the problem.

“It looks to me as if Graham and this Jim were the same person,” Curly said at length. “It seems as if, with all the interest he took in these letters, he must have written them himself.” Homer nodded silently. “From the way things fit in, I should say there was a pretty good chance of my being the boy who was kidnapped.” Homer nodded again, emphatically. “The interesting

part of the problem, then, is who Graham really is, and who—am I?"

"You've stated the case correctly, son," remarked Homer, resting his elbows on the table and cupping his chin in his open palms. "Let's hear what you make of it."

"Well, the first thing seems to be that old man Graham back there on the ranch isn't Graham at all. Of course if he was the outlaw, Dandy Jim, he might have been Paul Graham to start with; but that part where he speaks of getting letters and information out of P. G. before he passed in, makes that impossible. Who the real Paul Graham was I haven't the least idea. He may have been murdered, or he may have just died. Anyhow, there must have been something mighty good in it, or the other fellow would never have taken all the risk of impersonating him. Perhaps he had money left him, or something. And there seems to have been two kids in his way; likely they were brother and sister. We'll say that I was the boy, and—"

"And the girl is Jack!" exclaimed Homer, springing to his feet in excitement. "What a fool I was not to see it. Of course it's Jack."

Curly stared at him dazedly. "Jack!" he murmured, incredulously. "My sister! Why, I never thought—"

“Whether she ’s your sister or not,” interrupted Homer, picking up the chair he had overturned, “I ’ll bet a hat she ’s the girl Graham writes about in that first letter.”

Curly sat looking at him in an odd way for a few moments. “Well, we ’ll have to find that out,” he said presently.

“How the dickens will you do that?”

“Go to Galveston and make inquiries,” retorted Curly laconically. “If the man who died was worth three hundred thousand, besides a lot of real estate, he must have been pretty well known. Even after all this time we ought to be able to get some particulars about him.”

“That ’s so,” Homer agreed. “Gee! I wonder if he was your father?”

“I don’t know,” Curly answered briefly. “I ’ve been wondering so blamed much lately I ’ll go batty if I keep it up. Let ’s ride in to Midland to-morrow. We can take a train there for Galveston, and try to straighten this out. I don’t believe either of us will rest very easy till that ’s done.”

As he spoke he was idly tearing strips from a newspaper which lay on the table and folding them into small, compact pieces the size of the letters. When he had made three he wrapped them in the waterproof silk and, having tied the

package securely, he balanced it meditatively in one hand. Homer eyed him curiously.

“What are you doing that for?” he asked.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Curly answered vaguely. “Seeing if I could make it look the way it was when we found it, I reckon.”

He dropped it into the tin box and replaced the cover. Then, gathering up the letters, he tucked them inside his shirt. At that moment the supper call sounded, and both boys hurried into the kitchen, ravenously hungry now that they were able to think about it. Afterwards they sat about with the men for a while but were soon overpowered by sleep and turned in. At six next morning they were up feeling infinitely refreshed, and as they hurried into their clothes they discussed their plans.

“We ’d better leave the black here as well as your pack horse,” Curly said as he brushed his hair vigorously. “I ’ll leave a note for Ed telling him we ’ll come back for them, and explain all about the business.”

“Yes, and tell him we had to take his six-shooter. I ’ll bring that back, too.”

“I wonder what Shifty did with our guns,” mused Curly, picking up his neckerchief from the table. “The one I got from him was a great sight better—”

He paused abruptly, staring down at the table with widening eyes. The tin box lay there with its cover partly off. He could have sworn he had not left it that way last night. He picked up the box, put it down quickly and glanced at Homer.

“Have you touched the box since we left it yesterday?” he asked, trying to make his voice sound casual.

“No; why should I touch it?” returned Homer. “There ’s nothing in it—that is, nothing except that fake package you fixed up.”

“There is n’t even that there now.” Curly spoke slowly. He was feeling inside his shirt for the letters. “Somebody was in here last night and stole it.”

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SEARCH FOR A NAME

HOMER turned swiftly, his face a shade less brown. "Stole it!" he repeated blankly. "How could they? Who—"

"Who, is easy enough." There was a note of relief in Curly's voice; the letters were still there. "But I don't see how the dickens they got in here without our hearing them."

Homer turned the box upside down and shook it, almost as though he expected the packet to be concealed somewhere inside. "You mean that one of the gang has been here?"

"I don't know who else would take it. Ed's bunch are all right." Curly was buckling on his cartridge belt with considerable haste. "The thing for us to do is to light out quick before they find they've been fooled. Once we get on the train we'll be safe. They wouldn't dare to follow us to Galveston."

Snatching up their hats, they hurried out to the kitchen where breakfast was choked down in about three minutes. In another ten the horses had been

roped and saddled and they started northward at a rapid pace, casting anxious, suspicious glances as they flew along. Midland was less than twenty-five miles away, but to their harassed senses it seemed double that distance. Several times they sighted men riding toward them and had quite prepared for a scrimmage, only to have them turn out commonplace cow-punchers on the ordinary business of the range. When they finally reached Midland about ten o'clock, they were worn out.

"I feel as if I'd been put through a clothes-wringer," declared Homer, as they dismounted at the station.

"It's fierce!" Curly took off his hat and mopped his forehead. "I don't know that I'm backward when it comes to a regular scrap. I'm not looking for them, but I reckon I can hold my own in any mixup that comes along. But this waiting and wondering and not knowing when it'll come, or who it'll be, has certainly got my goat."

In reality they had ridden so hard that they had nearly two hours to wait for the train, which was not due until nearly noon. After bargaining with the hotel-keeper to look after their horses and saddles until they returned, they bought some crackers and dried beef and took these down to the station to eat. They might easily have had

something cooked at the hotel, but somehow they had a feeling that they wanted to be on the spot so there would be no possible chance of missing the train. When it finally drew in and they climbed aboard, the reaction was so great that both fell instantly asleep and did not wake up until they stopped at Baird, six hours later for supper.

Stepping off the train at Fort Worth, shortly after ten, Curly was a little bewildered. In all his life he had never seen a settlement larger than Amarillo, with its scant two thousand of population, and the sights and sounds and crowds of people here were rather confusing. Homer knew the ropes, however, and led the way to a hotel where he had stopped before. The train for Galveston left at seven in the morning, and the trip of twelve hours was quite uneventful. Reaching the latter city, they put up at a cheap hotel and after supper repaired to their room to discuss the situation.

"It's not going to be such an easy job as I thought," confessed Curly. "I had an idea we could find out about this Graham from 'most anybody, but I can see that would n't do at all; they'd think we were locoed."

He caught his boot-heels on the rung of the chair and for a moment or two sat in meditative silence,

his chin resting in his open palms. Then he looked up at Homer and smiled faintly.

“I don’t guess I like cities very well, kid,” he said slowly. “They make a fellow feel awful small. Out on the plains when you see a chap ’way off in the distance somewhere, you wonder right away who he is, and most generally you meet up with him, and say howdy, and chin a bit. Here, you run into somebody about every five feet, and they look like they want to eat you up. Why, you can’t even carry a gun!”

“You sure can’t—unless you want to be pulled in,” Homer returned.

“That ’s another thing. I can understand sheriffs, and all that, getting a fellow when he ’s really done something, like shooting a man or rustling cattle, but to be pulled in for carrying a gun—humph!” Curly’s tone was one of heart-felt disgust.

“Well, cities are cities,” remarked Homer philosophically, “and you can’t expect ’em to be like the open range. I wouldn’t live in one for money, but they ’re not bad once in a while for a change. This isn’t getting down to business, though. It seems to me the men we want to round up are lawyers. When a man dies, it ’s lawyers who always look after his property, and I propose

we make a list of all the lawyers in town, and tomorrow start and look them up."

"How the deuce are you going to make a list like that?" Curly's wrinkled brows betrayed his perplexity.

"Out of the directory," Homer returned promptly. "Down in the office they 've got a book with the names and addresses of everybody in Galveston. I'll borrow it and we can copy the list out now."

He was gone some time, but at last returned with the volume, having had considerable difficulty in persuading the clerk to let him take it away from the desk. It was then seen that even Homer's wordly wisdom had greatly underestimated the amount of legal talent supported by the city of Galveston. Four closely printed pages were given up to the profession, and it was long past midnight before they had laboriously copied the list of some three hundred names. Curly threw the pen viciously across the room and worked his cramped fingers back and forth solicitously.

"It 'll take about three months to round up that bunch," he said tartly.

"Oh, it's not as bad as that." Homer was more optimistic. "It's a big job, of course. but

probably we won't have to go through the whole list. Maybe we 'll strike somebody the first day who can tell us what we want."

They made an early start next morning—much too early, in fact, for they soon found that none of the offices were open till nine o'clock. They were well on their rounds at ten. Two hours later, coming out of a big office building on Jones Street, they crossed to a little park and sank down on a bench in silence.

Both were too mad to speak. In those two hours they had visited the offices of eight law firms. At six they had been cross-examined by the office boy, who could see no profit accruing to the firm by their presence, and consequently got rid of them quickly. At the next address a snippy clerk learned their business and curtly informed them that there was "nothing doing." They could hear his empty-headed laugh as they closed the door, and Curly hesitated in the hall, his fists clenched

"For five cents I 'd go back and teach that fellow manners," he muttered.

Homer took his friend by the arm. "Come on; what 's the use? You could n't teach him manners if you stayed here the rest of your life."

At the last office, through some carelessness on the part of a subordinate, they had stumbled in upon the head of the firm. But they came swiftly

out again with tingling ears and hands straying unconsciously to where their guns ought to be.

"I can't stand much more of that," Curly said presently, as he pushed a pebble about with the toe of his boot.

"I don't see why they 're such a bunch of coyotes," complained Homer plaintively. "Why can't they give a fellow a decent answer to a simple question? It wouldn't take up so much of their darned valuable time."

Curly made no answer, but his face was expressive. "Well, let 's get something to eat," he said presently. "I s'pose we 'll have to keep on with this afterwards, but I sure hate it like poison."

In the restaurant they took out the list and with the stub of a pencil viciously obliterated the names of the offending firms. Then they looked over the others.

"Let 's take a plain man next," Curly suggested. "Those fresh guys this morning were all 'and Cos.' or 'and Sons.' Here 's a good one: 'John Popham, 607 Lombard Street.' He sounds pretty good to me. Maybe he won't have all those fresh kids around to give you sass."

Lombard Street was near at hand, and Number 607 proved to be a big office building, even more solid and substantial and splendid than any they

had yet seen. With sinking hearts they surveyed it, and presently discerned the name of John Popham neatly done in gold on a number of windows on the third floor. It did not look encouraging, and they decided to take a walk around the block before going in.

They made the circuit several times and it was nearly two o'clock before they summoned courage to enter the somberly gorgeous hallway. By this time they had become accustomed, though not resigned, to the elevator, and in a moment they stepped out on the third floor before John Popham's door. The ante-room they entered was lined with leather-cushioned chairs and settees, and a mahogany rail separated it from the larger office. A sleek, well-brushed young man with an abnormal collar and the air of one perennially tired, came forward languidly and inquired their business.

"Is Mr. Popham in?" Curly asked briefly.

"No; Mr. Popham is at lunch."

"Will he be back soon?"

"Really can't say; he may, or he may not."

Mr. Popham's movements seemed a matter of complete indifference to the young man.

Curly hesitated. "Perhaps you can help us," he said at length. "I'm trying to find out about a man named Graham who died here fifteen years

ago. He left a lot of money, and I thought you might know about him.”

The young man imperfectly concealed a yawn. “Really, the name is not familiar. Graham, you say? What was his first name?”

“I don’t know,” Curly confessed. “But I think another man, Paul Graham, had something to do with the estate.”

“I ’m afraid I can’t help you,” the other said, examining his well-kept nails. “Perhaps some time when Mr. Popham is in—” he concluded vaguely.

Curly turned away with a sign and they walked to the door. Homer had half opened it when a voice behind them spoke suddenly.

“Wait!”

As he turned swiftly, Curly saw standing to one side of the rail a man of middle height with thick white hair and a trim, erect figure. There was a door in the corner with the word “Private” printed on the ground glass, and the man’s hand rested on the knob as if he had just stepped from an inner room. For a moment he did not speak. His keen, blue eyes were fixed on Curly’s face with an expression of mingled surprise and curiosity. Then his hand dropped to his side and he took a step forward. The clerk had retired and they were quite alone.

“Young man, would you mind telling me your name?”

The voice was clear and well modulated; the man's manner courteous, yet with an underlying touch as of one used to the ordering of men. As he hesitated to answer, the thought flashed on Curly that this must be Mr. Popham himself.

“I—don't—know,” he said in a low tone, his eyes fixed wistfully on the other's face. “That 's what I 'm trying to find out.”

“You spoke of Paul Graham just now. Has he anything to do with it?”

“I think so.”

The other turned briskly and opened the door behind him. “Step in here, please,” he said. “Your friend, too, if he will. I am John Popham.” He hesitated a moment and then went on slowly: “I think you have come to the right place.”

CHAPTER XXV

JOHN POPHAM, ATTORNEY

AS the two boys crossed the threshold, Mr. Popham followed them and closed the door. The room in which they found themselves was square and lofty with windows looking out upon two streets. The walls were wainscoted in dark mahogany, above which hung a number of pictures. On the floor was a dark rug, thick, soft, luxurious. A mahogany desk stood by one of the windows, and back of it was a broad, massive mahogany table, while scattered about the room were a number of comfortable leather-cushioned chairs. It was all very different from anything the boys had ever seen, and they stood embarrassed, not knowing quite what to do, until Mr. Popham had removed his hat and coat and hung them in a closet.

“Pray be seated,” he said, with a little touch of courtliness which seemed characteristic. When they had settled themselves, he sat down in the desk chair and, tilting it back a little, surveyed Curly quizzically. “And now let us have the story,” he said pleasantly.

“It ’s very long, and I don’t know just where to begin.” Curly looked worried. “Would you mind if I asked you a question or two first? It would sort of clear things up in my own mind and I ’ll be able to talk easier.”

“Not at all.” A fleeting smile passed over the old gentleman’s face. “It rather reverses the general procedure, but ask away.”

“Did you know Paul Graham?” Curly began hesitatingly.

“I did.” Mr. Popham’s mouth squared a little.

“Was there another man named Graham, who died here about fifteen years ago and left Paul Graham—ex—executor, I think you call it.”

Mr. Popham nodded. “There was.”

“Did this other—Graham, have a daughter and—and a son—” The boy’s voice shook a little,—“and was the son kidnapped?”

The smile faded from the lawyer’s face. One hand resting on the chair arm gripped it suddenly. His eyes, bright as stars, were fixed on Curly’s as if he would like to drag the very thoughts out of the boy’s brain.

“Yes,” he said abruptly. “Why do you ask that? What was this Graham to you?”

“I think—I think he was my father.”

“A-h!” Mr. Popham’s eyes narrowed and he bent forward. “I knew it!”

With which surprising remark, he sank back in his chair and surveyed the astonished boy over his joined fingertips.

Curly looked at him open-mouthed. “You—knew—it?” he stammered.

“I suspected it,” Mr. Popham returned composedly. “And now, if these are all the questions you want to ask, let us have the story. Tell me everything.”

There were still several things which Curly simply ached to know, but he managed to curb his curiosity and began his story. He told first of his life with Jerry Harden, of the latter’s attitude toward him, and of his failure to learn anything about his parents. Mr. Popham listened intently; now and then he nodded, and once or twice he asked a question. Then Curly went on to narrate the circumstances of Jerry’s death and of his own flight to the Circle Bar. When he had told of his first meeting with Paul Graham, the lawyer put up one hand.

“Stop a moment. His manner was odd, you say. In what way?”

“Well, it just looked a little queer when he found my name was Harden. That ’s what I ’ve always been called, you know.”

“But why should that affect him? What had he to do with this—Harden?”

“Oh! I forgot I had n’t come to that. Why, he had Jerry kidnap me, you know.”

“*What!*” Mr. Popham sat bolt upright, his eyes wide open with amazement.

“Yes; the letters we found in the tin box told about that.”

“Letters! You have letters?”

At that moment the door to the outer office opened and the sleek young man hesitated on the threshold. Mr. Popham turned impatiently. “I can see no one, Mr. Wilson—no one, you understand?” he said sharply. “I am most particularly engaged.”

With a bewildered glance at the two boys, quite out of keeping with his habitual expression of ennui, the youth retired and closed the door. Curly, meanwhile, had taken out the letters and laid them on the desk, and Mr. Popham pounced on them like a cat on a mouse. With a single movement of his slim fingers he twitched them open, laid them in a row, and selecting the one of the earliest date, began to read. As his eyes flew back and forth over the closely written lines, the color came and went in his thin, kindly face; his jaw squared. Once he murmured “Scoundrel!”

under his breath. At length he laid the letter down and looked at Curly.

“Jim!” he said contemptuously. “So that was his name. Jim what?”

“I don’t know his last name. I think he was Dandy Jim, the outlaw. I heard—”

“Wait,” interrupted the lawyer. “Let me read the others.”

There was silence again while Mr. Popham scanned the other letters. Then he laid them in a neat pile, placed a bronze weight on them, and sat back in his chair.

“A more dastardly, cold-blooded plot I have never encountered,” he said in a hard voice. “I always disliked the man; I must have mistrusted him instinctively. But I never thought of this. Now tell me; where did you get these letters?”

“We dug them up,” Curly answered. “I remembered— But hadn’t I better go back and tell about the other things at the ranch?”

“To be sure. Go on from where you left off—where the man recognized you.”

So Curly told briefly of the various accidents at the ranch, of his overhearing the conversation from the harness room window, of their journey back to Midland, and of all that had happened there.

“Quite in keeping,” commented Mr. Popham. “A man quite devoid of any moral sense. To think of that child having been under his influence all these years! It ’s appalling!”

Curly gave a start. “You mean Ja—Dorothy?” he asked anxiously. “You don’t think she ’s in any danger, do you?”

“Not now. She ’s safe for the time being, but we must get her away as soon as possible. The first thing, however, is to verify this handwriting.”

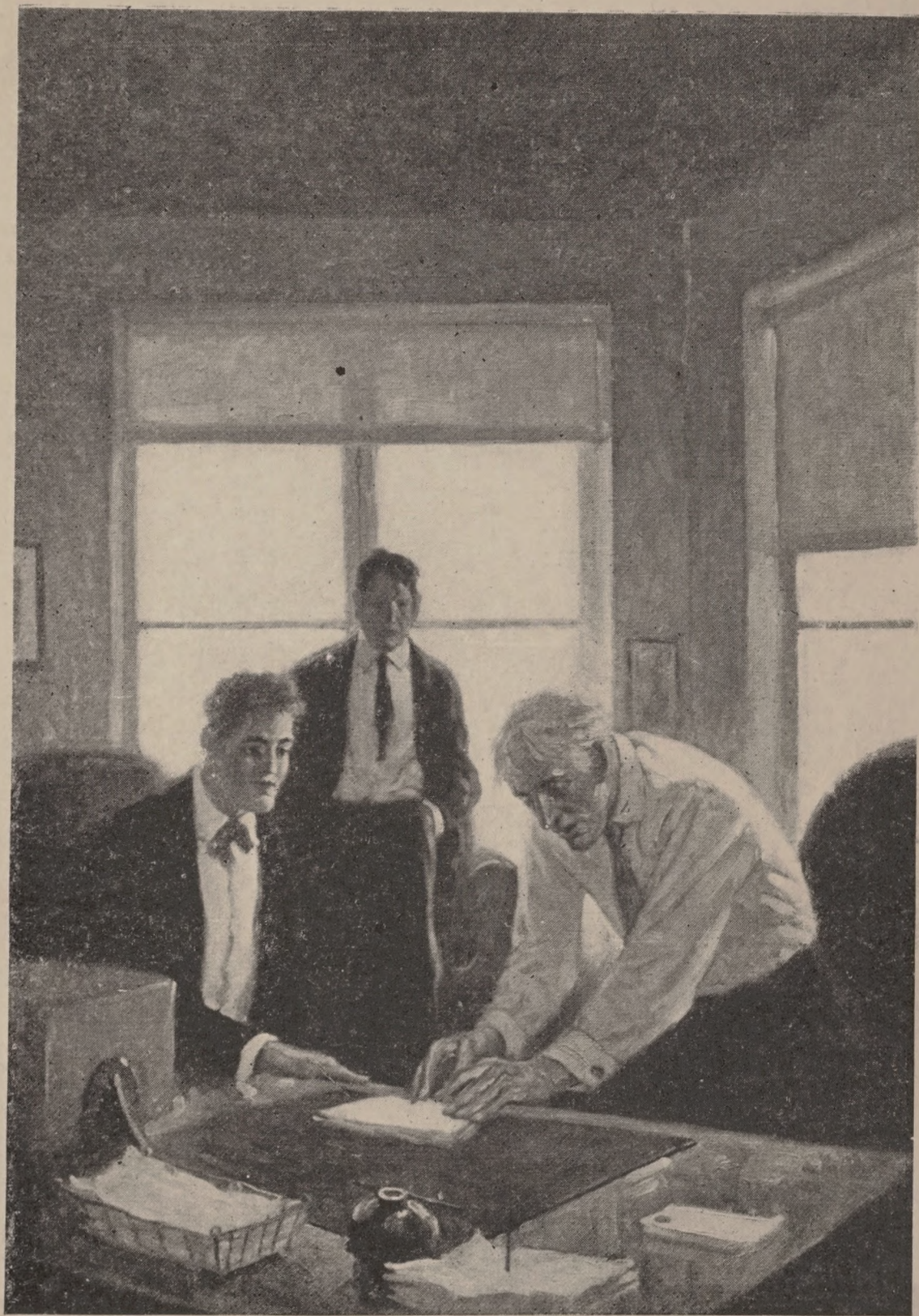
He pressed one of a row of buttons on his desk and a moment later a tall, stoop-shouldered man of middle age entered.

“Mr. Perry, will you kindly bring me the Graham Estate papers? Colonel Graham, you know.”

The other withdrew and presently returned with a good-sized box of japanned tin which he placed on the desk in front of Mr. Popham. The latter opened it at once and began turning over the contents.

“He was careful about writing,” he remarked. “The few letters I had from him were mostly typed, but I remember one— Ah, here it is.”

He unfolded a paper and spreading it out beside the longest of the three letters compared them closely. Presently he looked up at Curly and there was a note of triumph in his voice.



The lawyer pounced eagerly on the letters

“Identical!” he exclaimed. “The rascal has n’t even attempted to disguise his handwriting. I think that settles this part of the story beyond a doubt. As for yourself—” He paused and tapped the desk meditatively. “Of course, while personally I have no doubt whatever that you are the son of my old friend, Colonel Graham, proof will be necessary to establish that fact legally. It would be most satisfactory if we could obtain the testimony of some one who knew of the actual kidnapping, but aside from this impostor himself I doubt whether there is any one alive who could give it. Failing that, I suppose there are persons who have known you from childhood, and could swear that you have lived with this Jerry Harden for a certain number of years, and are the only child with whom he has ever been concerned?”

“Oh, yes,” Curly said readily. “There are two or three ranchmen who could do that.”

“Taken in conjunction with these letters, and with certain other things,” Mr. Popham continued, “I believe that would be sufficient to establish your identity. And now, I suppose you are eager to have me round out the story.”

He paused, and turning in his chair, looked down upon the crowded street below. And though his eyes seemed to be fixed upon the hurrying throngs,

he did not see them, for his mind was travelling swiftly into the long vanished past. Presently he gave a little sigh and glanced back at the boy who sat motionless, waiting eagerly for him to speak.

CHAPTER XXVI

AFTER FIFTEEN YEARS

“**I** KNEW your father,” the lawyer began slowly, “better, I think, than any man alive. We were chums together at college. You are very like him, boy.” His eyes were wistful as they travelled over the lithe, well-knit figure and rested finally on the clean-cut, sun-browned face with its steadfast, eager eyes and masses of tawny hair. “It was a shock to come upon you outside. I can’t get used to it.” He moved restlessly.

“After graduation we separated, but met here two years later, and to within six months of his death we were the closest friends. It was then that we had a—disagreement. It was over a trivial matter—so trivial, that I do not even remember how it came about. I was not well and when we quarrelled was upon the point of sailing to Europe for my health. I never saw him again. When I returned he had been dead two months.”

He put up one hand to shade his eyes and for a few moments was silent. “Your father’s name was James—James Graham,” he continued. “His title came from the state militia. He in-

herited some money, but made the greater part in real estate investments here and in Chicago. He had a younger brother Paul, of whom he was very fond but whom he saw little. I never knew him. I gather that he was a man of lovable nature but very little force of character. I know he never made a success of life, but spent his time, mainly in the West, going from one place to another and dabbling in many enterprises. When your father died it was found that he had drawn up a new will after my departure in which his brother was made co-executor with the Galveston Trust Company, and guardian of the two children. I always felt that save for that stupid quarrel he would have made me executor, and all this trouble would have been averted. At that time you were not quite three years old and Dorothy was a baby.

“When I returned home Paul Graham had not been located, though strenuous efforts were being made to find him in Arizona and New Mexico where he had last been heard from. Not three days later you were stolen one afternoon in the Park from under your nurse’s very eyes. It caused a tremendous sensation and for a time the city rang with it. But in spite of all the rewards and searchings and the publicity given it by the press, not a trace of you was discovered from that day to this.

“Nearly two months passed in unavailing search for your uncle, and then one day he suddenly walked into my office. He explained that he had been very ill in western Texas, and only some time after he had recovered did he see accidentally the news of his brother’s death and of the search for himself. He had a number of letters from your father, his photograph and one of yours sent when you were about a year old. He seemed perfectly familiar with every detail of your father’s life, and his account of his own wanderings corresponded exactly with what I had heard from your father’s own lips. He even went so far as to look up a friend of his youth—a man quite above suspicion—and convinced him that he was Paul Graham. It was one of the cleverest cases of impersonation I have ever heard of. The scoundrel must have pumped the real Paul Graham absolutely dry before his death. He may have done away with him, but I question whether that was necessary. Of course the fraud succeeded the more easily because no one had the least suspicion that all was not right.”

“I thought you said you suspected him,” Curly said hesitatingly.

“I disliked him,” Mr. Popham returned. “Suspicion is, perhaps, too strong a term. There was not a flaw in his story and you must remem-

ber I had no reason whatever for doubting it. There is one point, though, which we all seem to have overlooked. The real Paul Graham was weak and visionary, with no business acumen whatever, while this impostor showed great acuteness from the start. I have heard that he has more than doubled the value of the estate in these fifteen years."

"I wonder he did n't try to make away with it," said Curly.

"That was probably his intention at first, but the appointment of the trust company as co-executor made that impossible. Later, when he found how well the imposition worked, I imagine he grew to enjoy the position of a man of affairs, and with each succeeding year, of course, he felt more secure. But we have him in a corner now."

Mr. Popham arose and began pacing slowly back and forth, his hands clasped behind him. Presently he stopped in front of Curly.

"It's a little difficult to know just what steps to take," he said meditatively. "We must pounce on him without warning or he'll slip out of our hands. Besides, there should be no delay in getting Dorothy away from him. Fortunately I have his Chicago address. Whenever they have been in Galveston I've made a point of keeping in touch with the child, and something like a friendship has

grown up between us. Do you think they have left the ranch by this time?"

"I should think so. They were to start north the day after we left. We could make sure by telegraphing Bert."

"No, that would only put him on his guard." Mr. Popham sat down at his desk and took up a pen. "If he is at all suspicious of what has happened, he 'd naturally hurry back to the city to snatch what he could from the wreck. I think you had better run up to Chicago to-morrow. I shall swear out a warrant at once charging him with forgery, impersonation, embezzlement—any one of half a dozen charges will do. A detective can go with you and one of my own men. They should be able to handle the situation. Your part will be mainly to look after Dorothy."

"Could n't we start to-night?" Curly asked anxiously.

"Hardly. I doubt whether I can arrange things so soon. You 'd better be here to-morrow at eight prepared to take the train an hour later. I should like to have you both come home to dinner with me," he added, as Curly arose and picked up his hat, "but I shall be so busy here that I 'll just take a bite downstairs when I 'm through. There 'll be plenty of time for us to get acquainted when this is settled."

Curly took a step forward and held out his hand. "You 've been awfully good, Mr. Popham," he said earnestly. "I can't take it all in now. It does n't seem possible that so much has happened since I came in here. I can't ever thank you enough."

"Nonsense, my boy," the lawyer said briskly, as he stood up. "I 'd do a great deal more for your father's sake—and for yours, too. I think we shall be great friends. Well, good-by until tomorrow—Jim."

With a smile and a wave of his hand for Homer, he sat down again, and as they closed the door behind them the boys saw him press one of the ivory buttons and heard a muffled buzz in the outer office. They did not speak until they stepped out of the elevator. Then Homer grabbed Curly by one hand and thumped him on the back.

"Oh, boy!" he exclaimed delightedly. "Some business, all right! I had an awful job keeping still up there; I just about burst."

"I don't seem real at all," Curly commented. "I feel as if I was having one of those dreams you wake up from just about the time it 's getting interesting."

Homer laughed. "You 'll wake up all right when you get that money. Think of owning the ranch and having Jack for a sister."

“That ’s the best part of it all.” Curly’s tone was a little sober. “I ’ve never had anyone at all belonging to me—and she ’s such a corking sort.”

“She is that—the best ever. Well, I don’t suppose you ’ll have any use now for a poor, ornery cow man.”

Curly made a pass at him. “You go to blazes! If I hear any more talk like that I ’ll punch your head good and proper.”

“You don’t dare,” chuckled Homer. “You ’d get pulled in, and then you could n’t go to Chicago. Say, am I going to be taken along on that excursion?”

Curly eyed him threateningly. “Do you know you ’re one of the most exasperating persons for your size I know of? Why should n’t you go along? Don’t you want to?”

“Sure I do.” Homer’s eyes danced. “Only, I thought—”

“Don’t do it. It ’s a bad habit. Stop jawing and let ’s get some clothes. We ’ve got to look dead swell if we ’re going to travel with one of Popham’s clerks.”

They had paused in the doorway of the building, and now Curly took his friend by an arm and they joined the throng of people who filled the street, a jostling, home-going stream. As they

hesitated on the pavement, undecided, a man slipped past them and darted across the street. Curly caught only a glimpse of his side face, but that glimpse was enough.

“Shifty!” he gasped. “Homer—quick! There goes Shifty Harris!”

CHAPTER XXVII

THE DESERTED FLAT

“**W**HERE?” demanded Homer excitedly.
“Which one?”

“There; crossing the street. The fellow in the black suit.”

Instantly they started in pursuit, but by the time they had reached the further curb, the man had disappeared. They hurried around the next corner and halfway down the side street, but could find no trace of the fellow. After half an hour's fruitless search, they decided that they were only wasting time.

“He's given us the slip,” Homer sighed, as they walked slowly back to Lombard Street.
“Are you sure it was Shifty?”

“Of course I am. I'd know that nose of his any place.”

“I s'pose he's after those letters.” Homer chuckled. “He'll have a nice time getting them.”

“Won't he? Say, kid, this looks like a place where we could get fitted out.”

Homer eyed the expanse of plate glass dubiously. “Seems like a mighty swell joint for us,”

he objected. "How much have you got to blow in?"

"About two hundred. I have n't spent hardly any of that money of Jerry's. I tell you what. We 'll pool our money and both get the same outfit. It 'll want to be pretty good, considering where we 're going, and everything."

It took a good deal of persuasion to induce Homer to agree, but he finally gave in and they spent some time examining the suits and other articles so artfully displayed in the windows. At length they entered the store, and when they emerged an hour later Shifty himself would hardly have recognized them. They both wore suits of dark blue cheviot. Their high-heeled boots had been replaced by shoes; their flannel shirts by soft white ones with low turnover collars of stiff linen, and blue ties. The only things they had retained were their Stetsons, and both of them felt rather self-conscious and extremely uncomfortable. The first feeling soon wore off, but it was a long time before they could accustom themselves to the confinement of a collar. Returning to the hotel, they left their bags in the room, had supper, and after a short walk, went to bed.

A little before eight next morning they presented themselves at Mr. Popham's office and were

at once ushered in. After greeting them warmly, he presented them to the two men who were with him at the time: Mr. Bashford, the detective, and John Stuart, the lawyer's assistant. After a few moments' conversation, Curly told them of the encounter with Shifty Harris, and Mr. Popham frowned his annoyance.

"That 's bad—very bad," he said, tapping the desk with a pencil. "Graham's right-hand man," he explained in answer to Bashford's lifted eyebrows. "No doubt he 's keeping the villain posted."

"Hum—yes," boomed the detective, whose loud, hearty voice quite matched his appearance. "I 'm afraid he may give us a chase."

"Well, do the best you can," said Mr. Popham. "The most important thing, of course, is to find Miss Graham; but we must n't let the wretch slip through our fingers. You 'd better be getting on. You understand everything, Stuart? Good." He turned to Curly. "Good-by, Jim," he said, taking the boy's hand. "Mr. Stuart will see to everything. Come back here as soon as you find Dorothy, and we 'll decide about future arrangements. Good-by, and good luck."

Somewhat to the boys' surprise, instead of taking the elevator, they walked down one flight and Mr. Bashford led the way along a hallway which

ran the entire depth of the building. At the end of this they turned into a short branch hall and finally went down a narrow flight of stairs which brought them out at the rear on quite a different street.

“We ’ll keep that friend of yours guessing if he ’s out front,” explained the detective with a fat chuckle. “By the time he wakes up we ’ll be off.”

Making their way rapidly through several streets, they reached the station and went at once aboard the train. Stuart had secured space that morning, and when they steamed slowly out of the shed a little later they settled themselves comfortably for the long journey.

While quite without incident, this proved far from tedious. Mr. Bashford was jolly and full of fun—not in the least like their notion of a typical detective. They liked John Stuart, too, from the first, and Curly had several long talks with him and learned many additional particulars of his father’s life.

Thus Saturday and Sunday passed, and the interest was increased by the novelty of it all, and by the unaccustomed mode of travelling. But when breakfast was over on Monday morning and they realized that they were less than six hours from Chicago, the stories and jokes became rather less frequent and finally ceased altogether, as each

one of the oddly assorted quartette fell to silently speculating as to what the end of the journey would bring forth.

The anxieties of Bashford and of John Stuart were, of course, mainly professional. The former wanted to "nail" the criminal, as he expressed it; the latter was principally concerned in securing the estate from any chance of pillage. But Curly gave no thought to the money and very little to the false Paul Graham. His one idea was to find his sister and save her from any possibility of harm, and in this particular Homer was at one with him. To them the last few hours of their journey seemed to drag out interminably.

But it came to an end at last, and shortly after two the train pulled into the station on Polk Street. Alighting hastily, they tumbled into a taxi and were driven rapidly to the Police Headquarters. There was a short delay here while Mr. Bashford displayed his credentials and explained his errand. But at the end of that time he appeared with a plain-clothes man and they started at once for the address Dorothy had given the boys. This proved to be a fashionable apartment-house a short distance from the drive, into which Bashford and the officer disappeared, leaving the others outside. In about ten minutes the detective came out alone.

"He 's skipped," he announced tersely, resting

his arms on the window of the taxi. "Went two days ago. Syms is telephoning for a search warrant."

"Has—has my sister gone, too?" Curly asked anxiously.

"Yes, both of them. The hall boy says that about noon on Saturday he came in in a hurry and on the way up in the elevator told him he had to leave for Denver that afternoon. About two he ordered a taxi, and when it appeared, he and Miss Graham came down and drove away. Graham carried two suitcases, and your sister a handbag. The boy saw nothing strange in this, since they often went away together."

"Denver!" exclaimed Curly. "We can follow them, then. We ought to get started right away."

Bashford pushed his hat down over one eye. "No hurry, son," he said dryly. "Wherever they went, you can bet it was n't Denver. You don't suppose he'd blab it to the hall boy, do you? That was only a blind, and a mighty poor one."

Curly looked rather crestfallen, but the detective added quickly: "As soon as we get into the place, we'll overhaul it thoroughly and perhaps find out a thing or two. Don't worry, boy. Your sister won't come to any harm. I don't see why

he took her with him, in fact; she 'll only be in his way."

Nevertheless, Curly did worry a good deal. It was maddening to have to sit there helpless with Dorothy in the hands of such a man, and probably travelling further and further away with every passing minute. Presently an officer appeared with the warrant and they all went up to the fourth floor, where the manager let them into the apartment with his pass key.

It was an attractive suite, consisting of a large living-room with a smaller study opening out of it, three good-sized bedrooms and two baths, all of which were tastefully and even richly furnished. The study naturally claimed their attention first, and they found it in the greatest possible disorder. Papers littered the floor and covered the top of a large desk. Several drawers had been hurriedly pulled out and lay face downward where they had fallen, the contents scattered on all sides. The door of a cabinet in one corner swung open, revealing only empty shelves behind. In the larger room a good-sized fireplace was filled with ashes, from which the officials were able to salvage only the charred stubs of several check books and the half-consumed covers of some large ledgers.

While this examination was naturally of much

interest to the others, Curly and Homer soon tired of it and went off to inspect the rest of the apartment. The bedrooms opened from a wide hallway, and the first one they entered was plainly Mr. Graham's. The masculine air of the appointments and the array of garments strewn about bore evidence of that; and after a casual look around they passed on. A guest room came next, neat, austere, immaculate. Dorothy's room must be the last, and as they approached it Curly's pulse quickened.

A moment later, through the open door he took in the dainty furnishings, the graceful dresser covered with silver things, a dress thrown carelessly over a chair, and a great wave of tenderness swept over him. The next instant he uttered a low exclamation, darted to the dresser and snatched up a scrap of paper which was fastened to the cushion with a pin. There was silence for a moment as his eager glance swept the hastily pencilled lines. Then he looked up, his eyes bright with excitement and fresh hope.

"It's from Jack!" he exclaimed. "They've gone to New York—not Denver. Listen!"

Something dreadful has happened, I know. Uncle has just come in and says we must leave for New York at once. His manner is so odd that I'm almost afraid of him. He's been acting curiously ever since we came back from Texas. He's in the front room now tearing up papers and burning them, which makes me think something serious is the matter. I'll

pin this to my cushion and if anyone finds it please send it to Mr. John Popham, Galveston, at once. If I find out that anything is really wrong, I'll try and wire Mr. Popham from New York.

DOROTHY GRAHAM.

“She ’s in New York!” exclaimed Curly. “Think of it! And we ’re hanging around here when every minute ’s precious. We may even be missing a train by loafing.”

With the note in his hand, he stepped past Homer and hurried through the hall to the front room.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE END OF THE SEARCH

“**T**HAT girl ’s got a head on her shoulders, all right,” Bashford said as he read the paper. “New York, eh? We ’ll have to hustle to catch the flier.” He turned to the officer. “You can keep an eye on this place, can’t you?”

“Sure. I ’ll have a man stay here till you get back. Better wire New York Headquarters, had n’t you? He might try to slip off on a liner.”

“I ’ll do that at the station.”

The detective picked up his hat and coat and followed the others to the door. The taxi was still waiting outside and they reached the station in time for Bashford to get New York on the telephone and have five minutes’ talk with the Police Headquarters.

“They ’ll do the best they can,” he remarked as he joined the others in the observation car. “Watch the piers and all that. But two days is a mighty long start.”

“Still, there ’s always the wireless,” commented

John Stuart. "The only trouble would be if he sailed for one of those South American countries where there 's no extradition."

Bashford subsided weightily into a chair. "We 'll hope for the best," he said, mopping his forehead. "It 's a mighty hard thing these days to escape the law." He looked quizzically at Curly. "Don't worry so, son," he said, smiling. "That sister of yours is n't going to let herself be taken to South America, believe me. If he tries any stunt like that she 'll give him the slip pretty quick, or I 'm very much mistaken."

"But if she does, how will she find us?" Curly asked.

"Through Popham. I wired him all about it and he 'll let us know directly he hears from her."

This encouragement relieved Curly considerably and he was able to consider the future in a much more cheerful frame of mind. When they reached the Grand Central Station next morning matters were still further cleared up by a telegram which awaited the detective at the information bureau. It read as follows:

Message received. Miss Graham at Holland House. See her at once.

JOHN POPHAM.

Ten minutes later they entered the hotel and approached the desk. The clerk there could give

them no information about Miss Graham, but referred them to the manager. The latter was stiff at first with a touch of suspicion in his manner, but a few words of explanation from Stuart thawed him considerably.

“Miss Graham is here alone and in our charge,” he explained. “Under the circumstances we have to be particular. If you will give me a card or note, I will have it sent up.”

Stuart wrote a few words on his card, and they were ushered into a reception room. As Dorothy entered five minutes later, she paused in surprise. She had expected to see one man, and here were four.

“Mr. Stuart?” she asked hesitatingly, and then she gave a low, startled cry. “Why, Curly!” she gasped dazedly. “I— Homer, too. I had no idea—”

She broke off, unable for a moment to speak. The shock of the unexpected meeting, combined with the sudden release of the tension under which she had labored so long, quite unnerved her, and for an instant she had to fight for self-control. When she had recovered she turned quickly to the boys.

“I ’m a perfect idiot,” she said as she grasped their hands. “But it *was* a shock finding you here and I ’ve—been a little worried lately.” She

smiled at them through her tears. "I can hardly believe it yet. I'm very glad to meet you, Mr. Stuart," she went on as Curly presented the young lawyer. "And Mr. Bashford, too. It's really all so bewildering that you'll have to make allowances for my state of mind."

"Quite so, my dear young lady," boomed Bashford benevolently. "We can guess a little of what you've been through." He paused, glancing at the lawyer. "I think, Stuart, we had better leave our young friend here to explain matters. One man can do it much better than four. We'll take a look around and be back in half an hour. Your uncle is not with you, Miss Graham?"

Dorothy looked startled. "No," she said quickly. "No, he's not."

"You have no idea where he's gone?"

"None at all. I—I have n't seen him since Sunday. I—ran away from him."

"Ah, then we shall lose nothing by this brief delay."

Mr. Bashford bowed gallantly, and joined the others in the hall. As the heavy portières fell into place behind him Dorothy turned and looked inquiringly at Curly. Her face was pale and her eyes troubled.

"What is it, Curly?" she asked hastily. "What's it all about? Uncle?"

Curly hesitated. "It 's quite a long story," he said. "Let 's sit down first." When they had settled themselves on a sofa in the corner, he went on slowly: "Yes, it 's partly about Mr. Graham, and—and partly about—me."

"You!" A look of distress came into her face. "There have n't been any more—accidents?"

"Oh, no," he assured her. "Nothing like that. Gee! I wish I had the gift of gab. I don't know how to begin."

She glanced at him mischievously. "Curly, dear, you 're not going to propose, are you?"

"I did have some such idea," he grinned. "How would you like me for a brother?"

"I 'd love it, of course. But do stop fooling and tell me what it 's really all about."

The laughter died out of his face, save for a whimsical, tender smile that curved the corners of his mouth. He bent forward earnestly, his brown, muscular hands clasped tightly over one knee.

"I 'm not fooling, Jack," he said slowly. "It 's part of the story I have to tell you."

As the girl looked at him closely, scrutinizingly, something in his eyes told her that he was speaking the truth. And as she continued to gaze into his face, the color slowly ebbed away from hers,

her eyes grew wider, her lips half parted and her breath came a little unevenly.

"I—don't—understand," she faltered. And then, quite suddenly, the truth came to her. "Curly!" she gasped. "You—you're not—my brother—who—who was—"

"Yes," he answered simply. "The one who was stolen years ago. Are you sorry, Jack?"

Her eyes were blinded by a sudden rush of tears. "Sorry?" she sobbed. "You dear, silly boy!"

She fumbled for her handkerchief and, not finding it, she turned suddenly and hid her face against his shoulder. Curly stroked her hair gently, letting her cry on undisturbed.

"If you only knew," she went on presently in a rather shaky voice, "how many, many nights I've lain awake thinking about that poor little boy, and wondering what dreadful things might be happening to him—and to think it's you, whom I've always liked so much. Do give me your handkerchief; I can't find mine."

She dabbed her eyes with it for a few moments in silence. Then all at once she sat up and stared at him.

"Then he's—your uncle, too," she said in a queer voice. "And yet he let you work there on the ranch under another name. I—I don't understand."

“Of course you don’t, Jack, because that ’s part of the story, too. You see, he isn’t really our uncle at all. He ’s a man who somehow got hold of our real uncle’s papers and all that, and passed himself off for him.”

And as briefly as possible Curly went on to give her the details of the curious story. When he had finished she was bewildered, and small wonder; since in that brief half hour her whole world had turned topsy-turvy, and her very outlook upon life changed. But it was so distinctly a change for the better that she was not long cast down, and by the time the others returned she was quite herself and able to give them an account of her own adventures.

“I was afraid something was wrong from the first,” she began. “The way we left home was odd, and all the way here uncle hardly said a word and was quite cross when I asked him about it. Then there was the hotel—a horrid place on a side street when we have always stopped here. That seemed queer. Directly we were taken to our rooms he went out telling me not to stir until he came back. Why should he have done that unless something was the matter? Of course I stirred; anybody would. I waited till he had gone about ten minutes and then I went down and looked at the register. I found he had put us down as

Mr. and Miss Gordon of Kansas City. Fancy! Then I was sure he 'd done something dreadful, and it frightened me a good deal. I could n't get away quick enough. I hurried back and got my bag and walked out. Luckily no one paid any attention to me. For a while I could n't think what to do. I have n't any friends here, so I just walked and walked, afraid any minute he might see me. Then all at once I thought of this hotel where the manager knew me. It was stupid not to have thought of it before. I got on a bus and came straight here, and everything turned out beautifully. The manager was as nice as could be. He wired Mr. Popham himself and promised that if uncle came to inquire he would put him off and not tell him I was here. That's about all, I think."

"Then you have n't an idea where Mr. Graham went?" Bashford asked.

Dorothy shook her head. "Not the slightest. I rather fancied he meant to take a steamer, but it was only guesswork."

"Well, we shall have to get busy." Bashford arose and picked up his hat. "I'll go down to Headquarters at once." He turned to Curly. "Are you going back to-day, or shall you stay here?"

"I should think we might as well go back; we

can't do any good here. It 's all up to Dorothy, though." Curly looked at his sister, who nodded emphatically.

"I don't want to stay here any longer than we have to," she said.

"We may as well take the first train to Chicago, then. Mr. Popham told me to come back as soon as we found Dorothy, and I reckon you and Mr. Stuart can do all that 's necessary here."

"I think so. There 's really no need of your staying unless you want to. Well, I 'll say good-by now, then. I shall probably be very busy for the rest of the day."

After he had gone Mr. Stuart remained only long enough to have a little talk with Curly and give him advice about the best roads to take. Then, having supplied him with money, he, too, departed.

The three chums had dinner at the hotel and then took the night train back to Chicago. Here they made a flying visit to the apartment to get Dorothy's clothes, and the day following found them speeding southward.

CHAPTER XXIX

EVER AFTERWARD

AS Curly clattered around the ranch house and swung himself off his horse, Dorothy looked up with a smile.

“Did you get a letter from Uncle John?” she asked. “What ’s he say? Is he coming to make us a visit?”

Curly threw the reins over his horse ’s head and flung himself down beside his sister. “He can’t get away just yet,” he said, pulling a much crumpled envelope out of his pocket. “He has a lot of important cases on hand.”

“Isn’t he a dear old idiot! I believe he ’s afraid of roughing it. He doesn’t realize how well he ’d be taken care of now we ’ve got all the modern improvements.” Her eyes rested approvingly on the new wing and then swept over the rest of the house, glistening in a fresh coat of white paint. “What else does he say?”

“Well, the case is over.” Curly spoke slowly. “He ’s been sentenced.”

Dorothy's face clouded a little.

"How—much?" she asked.

"Twenty years."

She winced. "As long as that?"

"It 's practically for life, I suppose."

For a space there was silence as the girl gazed out over the wide expanse of prairie, still green from the spring freshets, lying warm and golden in the hot June sun. Then her clear eyes, still slightly troubled, came back to Curly sprawling beside her, his head propped on his hand, his elbow digging the sod.

"I suppose I 'm a silly idiot," she said, "but somehow I can't bring myself to hate him the way I ought to. He was always very good to me; I think he must have been fond of me. Does it seem very—feminine?"

"Not enough to hurt." Curly settled himself luxuriously on his back, hands clasped under his head and hat tilted over his eyes. "I 'm glad enough he 's got his deserts and won't trouble us again, but I can understand how you feel."

"Well, let 's not think about him any more. What about your case? Has the court given it 's final decision yet?"

"Oh, yes; I forgot that. Last Thursday, it was. I guess the affidavits from Ed Winton and the other fellows in Midland did the trick. Anyhow,

Mr. Popham's my guardian, too, and I 'm your brother for better or worse. You don't know what a peck of trouble you 've let yourself in for, old lady."

Dorothy smiled at the tall, sun-browned young fellow. "You 're running some risks yourself. You don't know what a trial I am when I 'm in a temper— Drat!" She broke off suddenly as the thread snapped. "That 's the fourth time. Oh, dear! I *hate* to sew."

Curly's eyes crinkled. "Why do you then?"

"I 've got to," she sighed. "Why, the poor child 's in rags. Actually he has hardly a stitch to his name, and he can't go on forever wearing your shirts and things. He looks ridiculous."

A sudden clatter of falling tinware came from the kitchen, followed by a shrill voice raised to an angry pitch. The next instant a small boy shot out of the door, hesitated an instant, and then scuttled over to Dorothy and nestled down beside her. In each fist he held a large cooky, one of which he hastened to cram down with amazing rapidity. Then Mrs. Reilly's portly form loomed in the doorway.

"Thievin' little brat!" she exclaimed with vigor. Then her eyes fell on him. "Oh, there ye are. He 's been at them cookies again, Miss Dorothy," she complained, " an' upset the whole pan on the

floor. It 's whipped he ought to be, an' taught manners."

Dorothy stroked the tousled black head which was snuggled close against her. "But he 's been whipped so many times, Mrs. Reilly," she said apologetically, "and I don't suppose he ever saw a cooky till he came here. You wait a while and he 'll surprise you with his good manners."

Mrs. Reilly sniffed incredulously. "He will that," she retorted. "Seein' is believin', miss. But he 'll have to keep out of here. He 's under foot the whole endurin' time, and I can't do my work proper."

"That 's because he 's so fond of you, Mrs. Reilly." Though his tone was serious, Curly's eyes twinkled mischievously.

The good lady sniffed again, though with rather less emphasis, and without further words retired to the kitchen.

"I think she 'll come around in time," said Dorothy, as she threaded the despised needle. "She has to hold out a while considering the fuss she made when he first came."

"Well, you 're a nice, lazy bunch," said a voice, and looking up they saw Homer standing at the corner of the house, hands in his pockets and hat tilted rakishly over one eye.

Dorothy looked indignant. "Lazy!" she ex-



Dorothy found his eyes fixed on her with a look of wistful tenderness

claimed. "I wish you had half the things to do in one day that I have. Lazy, indeed! You don't look very busy yourself if anyone should ask me."

Homer's limpid eyes assumed a look of injured innocence. "I put myself out to see if you folks did n't want to ride out to Charvis with me," he murmured plaintively, "and this is the way I get thrown down. Why, hello, Buster. What are you hiding for?"

The small boy did not answer at once. He was busy removing a few tell-tale crumbs from his mouth by a simple but effective sweep of his tongue. When the operation was completed, he rolled his eyes expressively toward the kitchen.

"Got chased out," he remarked briefly.

Homer grinned approvingly. "There 's the boy for you. Knows how to rustle for his grub already. He 'll make a dandy cow-puncher when he grows up."

"For goodness' sake don't be putting such ideas into his head," Dorothy protested as she folded up her work. "We have trouble enough with him now without your egging him on. Mrs. Reilly 's very angry with him."

"She 'll get over it," said Homer lightly. "But, say! Has n't he changed, though? You would n't know him for the same kid we brought home a month ago. He sure was a sight."

“Why would n’t he be!” The girl sprang up and shook the threads from her skirt. “Left alone in that dreadful place—deliberately deserted by that beastly Shifty man and his gang! It was the most inhuman thing I ever heard of. The poor child was half starved and nearly dead with fright.”

Her face flushed angrily; then she looked down at the child’s serious face raised to hers. “But that ’s all over and we won’t think about it any more. You boys saddle up and I ’ll be ready in a minute. Come, Kiddie, you ’ll have to stay with Mrs. Reilly while we ’re gone.”

The child took her hand obediently and they disappeared into the house. When she came out, ten minutes later, Curly was waiting at the door with Tawny, a shapely chestnut, whose crinkly white mane and tail were the joy of her heart. As she appeared, he pricked up his ears and whinnied softly.

“Greedy,” she reproved, as she stepped forward and took the reins. “It is n’t me you love, it ’s sugar.”

The horse rubbed his soft nozzle against her cheek, and then playfully nipped the hand raised to stroke him.

“There, take it.” She popped the sugar into his mouth, and as he crunched it, she turned to

Curly and found his eyes fixed on her with a look of wistful tenderness and pride.

“A penny for your thoughts,” she challenged gaily.

Curly hesitated. “I was thinking what a mighty lucky chap I am,” he said at length.

“Lucky?”

A faint flush tinged her cheeks and her fingers tangled themselves unconsciously in Tawny’s mane.

“Yes, to have found a sister—like you, and—all this.” He made a gesture with his hand. “I don’t deserve it.”

“Silly boy!” She smiled faintly. “Don’t ever talk that way again—don’t even think it. It’s I who am the lucky one.”

Homer’s halloo reached them from the lower gate. Dorothy turned her stirrup and sprang lightly into the saddle.

“Coming!” she called.

Curly followed her, and together they rode out of the shadow of the gnarled, old cottonwood into the golden sunlight of the summer day.

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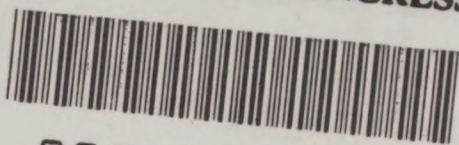
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